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## **Social Capital, Civil Society, and Peacebuilding in Northern Ireland**

Divided societies like Northern Ireland often encounter extreme difficulty when trying to overcome historic sectarianism. Ethnic groups feel threatened by one another. This is known as the ethnic security dilemma. These ethnic groups often cling to narratives that reinforce negative stereotypes, thereby preventing trust from forming with members of the “other” group in society. Historically in Northern Ireland, nationalists saw efforts at improving community relations as an attempt to force them into a majority unionist culture. Meanwhile, unionists perceived these

same efforts as a waste of resources that should be spent on finding and prosecuting terrorists. In other words, each community viewed the betterment of inter-communal relations as a mechanism by which the opposing group sought to take advantage of it (either politically or violently). The Belfast or Good Friday Agreement attempted to break this historical narrative by re-envisioning a Northern Ireland that belonged to both communities through the context of a devolved local government. The effective implementation of such complex and multi-level agreement cannot be achieved by political elites in a democratic setting without mass-based support. A just and lasting

peace in Northern Ireland requires not just agreements by political leaders, but active involvement within and between the communities. Employing data from the Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey, this paper will demonstrate that relations between Catholics and Protestants have improved in the last five years even though important identity based differences remain in Northern Ireland. The peace process is beginning to pay off as slowly a more civil society is emerging in Northern Ireland.