

Bonfires for Peace? What Northern Ireland can learn from Sierra Leone

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In the heart of Sierra Leone, community bonfires are transforming societies, while in Northern Ireland, similar traditions can deepen divisions.

In Sierra Leone, the organisation Fambul Tok (“Family Talk” in Krio) uses traditional bonfire ceremonies for community healing. Initially, meetings around the bonfire focused on addressing grievances from the brutal civil war (1991–2002), such as dealing with stolen property, exile of community members, or even more serious issues, such as integrating former child soldiers or even murder. These carefully planned and facilitated gatherings, sometimes taking months to prepare, provided spaces for confession, apology, and forgiveness.

But today, as I learned during a recent visit, these bonfire ceremonies have evolved. As the war recedes into history, these ceremonies now address contemporary local conflicts, from disputes over development priorities to family and community disagreements that threaten community cohesion. Fambul Tok sees such dispute resolution as essential to a healthy community and economic progress.



Bonfire Ceremony in Sierra Leone, photo by Libby Hoffman

The irony isn’t lost on those of us living in Northern Ireland, where bonfires serve as annual flashpoints of tension. While we can’t directly compare the

societies, Sierra Leone's experience offers two crucial insights for Northern Ireland.

First, it shows that bonfires need not be instruments of division. While we cannot simply transplant their model into our different historical context, it challenges us to reimagine how traditions might evolve. Perhaps we need to carefully reconsider Northern Ireland's bonfires within the framework of a long-term peace plan not as symbols of division but as potential touchstones for peace and reconciliation.

Second, Sierra Leone illustrates a truth Northern Ireland has long ignored: no meaningful development can occur without first mending broken relationships. As Fambul Tok aptly stated, putting resources into a community with unresolved conflicts is like pouring water into a bucket full of holes. The view in Sierra Leone is that sustainable development can only take root after repairing these holes—through relationship-building and reconciliation work at all levels of society.

This insight exposes a critical blind spot in Northern Ireland's approach to development. The recently released draft Programme for Government speaks optimistically of building "a globally competitive, sustainable, and inclusive economy which benefits everyone." Yet, it largely ignores how deeply communal divisions undermine these aspirations.

Community and economic development in Northern Ireland is messy. Basic infrastructure projects become proxy battles over which community will "really" benefit, whether we are talking roads, bridges or stadiums. The inability to transcend these divisions leads to absurd inefficiencies: duplicate community centres built in close proximity to service Catholic and Protestant communities respectively, a catalogue of shelved projects due to political differences after spending millions on initial consultations, under-populated schools within walking distance of each other because educational integration is opposed, and segregated housing developments that force people to travel great distances to access services.

Northern Ireland faces a clear choice. We can continue pretending that economic development alone, peppered with nominal "sharing" initiatives, will heal divisions, while watching as resources drain through the holes in our communal fabric. Or we can learn from Sierra Leone's example, acknowledging that genuine progress requires us to actively and continuously mend relationships.

The path forward isn't easy. Unlike Sierra Leone's bonfires, which serve as catalysts for healing, Northern Ireland's traditions remain stubbornly divisive. There's also a deep fear that linking ongoing political division and economic development will paralyse progress. Yet that's precisely why we need to heed

Sierra Leone's lesson: transformative change begins not with grand economic plans and platitudes about peace through prosperity but with the patient, deliberate work of rebuilding trust within and between communities and at the political level.

Development isn't just about building new roads, attracting investment, or constructing schools and hospitals — it's dependent on building bridges within and between communities and moving forward together. Until we commit to that harder task, we will continue to pour our resources into a fundamentally leaky bucket.

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