Urban Conflicts Conference Report

‘...a great conference, a great subject, the right moment to bring all these diverse yet connected forms of knowledge together!

– Saskia Sassen (personal communication)

Queen’s University Belfast hosted the Conflict in Cities (CinC) ESRC funded Project conference ‘Urban Conflicts: Ethno-National Divisions, States and Cities’ on 19th to 21st May 2011. The multi-disciplinary conference organised by the CinC Project team in Belfast and co-sponsored by the World Bank and the Northern Ireland Community Relations Council was a resounding success. It brought together 170 scholars and practitioners from 15 countries who addressed contested cities in Asia, Africa, Europe, North America and the Middle East.

The adoption of a multi-dimensional and multi-level approach promoted broad-ranging interpretations and animated discussion of the nature and dynamics of conflicts, both historical and contemporary, in ethno-nationally divided cities. These interwoven and, at times, competing understandings were evident in the 87 academic, policy and practice-based papers presented. Topics ranged from the interrelationships between empires, national states and cities through urban planning, architecture and regeneration, cultural heritage, everyday life, urban public space, art, violence, conflict management, resistance and agonistic urbanism.

‘Capturing Urban Conflicts’ Project Exhibition

Recognising that visual and material aspects of cities are often overlooked in verbally and textually oriented research, members of the CinC Project team based in Cambridge produced a Project exhibition, entitled ‘Capturing Urban Conflicts’ including maps of contested cities, specially drafted by team members, and photo-essays composed by project investigators, researchers and students of Project cities. The maps drew attention to sites of contention and interaction but also highlighted fluidity, ambiguities and specificities -essential elements in understanding the complexities of urban conflict. Drawing on the extensive CinC photographic archive the photo-essays provided glimpses into the everyday life of the diverse cities covered by the Project.
**Keynote Address**

The keynote address given by Saskia Sassen and the two policy panels were highlights of the conference; all three were filmed and will shortly be available through the conference and the CinC Project websites. Saskia Sassen’s wide ranging presentation, entitled Urban Space: Enabling the Powerless used the city as a lens for questioning the limits of military superiority and war; she suggested that the urban ‘physics’ of civil society may create the conditions under which powerlessness becomes a complex and ambiguous condition that holds the possibility of obstructing superior power.

**Policy Panels**

The policy panel on the opening day of the conference was focused on policies and progress in conflict transformation in Northern Ireland and brought together representatives from community and voluntary sector, local government, the Arts and business. While recognising and applauding the strides that had been made in moving from violence to peace as reflected in the physical changes in Belfast, panel participants highlighted the danger of complacency. They stressed that the maintenance of peace would require ongoing co-operation and vigilance and, in particular, that all members of society must feel part of, and benefit from, a ‘regenerated’ city.

Finally, the members of the policy panel on the concluding day of the conference discussed the relationship between cities, conflict and development on a global scale. Questions addressed were how political conflict and violence hamper development; the ways in which development can transcend conflict; and the types of institutional changes and policies needed for movement away from violence. The discussion highlighted the changing nature of political violence globally and its increasing inter-penetration with criminal sources of financing. Intervention at urban or municipal level was seen as important to the long-term transition from violent to peaceful societies. The panel emphasised the need for coalition building and for a wide range of legitimate institutions in order to provide broad-base protection/security for citizens to address social injustice and promote economic opportunity.

**Bus tour**

Participants thoroughly appreciated the organised bus tour of some of Belfast’s ‘peacewalls’ and segregated neighbourhoods. The tour provided them with an opportunity to get a first-hand impression of the complex intertwining of socio-economic, spatial and political divisions in the city and produced two very distinct discourses on these divisions from republican and loyalist perspectives.