

## **When Monitoring Becomes Meaning-Making: Youth Work, Belonging and the Politics of Counting**

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26 March 2026

In Northern Ireland, peacebuilding and community relations work is shaped not only by what we do, but by how we are required to account for it. Monitoring frameworks continue to ask organisations to categorise participants using inherited community labels: most commonly Protestant/Unionist/Loyalist, Catholic/Nationalist/Republican, and a residual 'other' category.

These categories are often treated as neutral administrative tools. But they are not neutral. They carry power. They shape how communities are seen, whose experiences are recognised and allowed to matter, and which identities are understood to matter within peacebuilding systems.

For youth work practice, grounded in voluntary participation, agency and belonging, this creates a deep tension. The data systems many organisations are required to use rely on fixed identity markers that increasingly sit at odds with how young people understand themselves. When young people do not see themselves reflected in these classifications, what does that mean for participation, trust, and ultimately peacebuilding itself?

Across a range of publicly funded peace and community relations programmes, guidance often prioritises demonstrating "cross-community" engagement through numerical ratios based on religious or community background. While many frameworks now acknowledge complexity, recognising that some participants may be reluctant to self-categorise, or that alternative indicators may be needed, the underlying logic often remains the same: historic binaries continue to structure how impact is understood and evidenced. When monitoring frameworks fix identity in advance, they risk reproducing the very hierarchies and exclusions that peacebuilding claims to address.

This is not about any one funder or programme. Similar approaches can be found across multiple funding streams and policy environments. Over time, these requirements risk becoming normalised, not just as technical expectations, but as social norms about what counts as peacebuilding, who counts as a participant, and which forms of belonging are eligible in the system.

## **Who gets to decide who you are?**

A power-aware approach to peacebuilding asks us to pay attention not only to outcomes, but to authority over knowledge.<sup>1</sup> Who decides which identities “count”? Who defines the categories through which impact is recognised? And whose voices are excluded when lived experience does not fit predefined boxes?

Significantly, the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland (2011: 39) has published [guidance](#) on how to assign a community background to someone who does not self-identify within the recognised categories. While developed with equality aims in mind, this raises uncomfortable questions for youth work and peacebuilding alike:

- What happens when people are counted but not heard?
- What does it communicate when identity and belonging is administratively imposed rather than chosen?
- How does this shape whose experience is seen as credible, fundable, or policy-relevant?

This is not simply a technical challenge. It is about power, about whose ways of naming, knowing and belonging are prioritised within systems of governance and funding. In a society still shaped by sectarian division and increasingly marked by racialisation and migration, this has real consequences for who feels included, secure, and recognised.

## **When categories lag behind lived realities**

At a recent seminar on peacebuilding and youth work, a challenging question was posed: *Is peacebuilding stuck in the past if it continues to centre the Catholic–Protestant binary?*

For many young people today, particularly those growing up in mixed, migrant, or multi-identity contexts, this binary does not reflect how they understand themselves or their relationships. Yet when impact must be evidenced through

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<sup>1</sup> A “power-aware approach” is not a single formal framework. It draws on feminist and decolonial thinking and focuses on how power shapes whose identities and knowledge are recognised within systems (see Smith, 2012; Cascant Sempere et al., 2024).

these categories, a distorted picture can emerge: one that reflects institutional assumptions more than lived reality.

The danger here is not only misrepresentation. It is that monitoring systems quietly set the terms on which identity is recognised, reinforcing fixed notions of community at a time when young people are actively negotiating more fluid, relational forms of belonging. This risks managing difference without transforming the deeper power relations that structure it.

### **Why monitoring still matters**

At the same time, a power-aware ethic does not suggest abandoning equality monitoring altogether. Data remains essential for exposing structural exclusion, whether in education, employment, housing or access to services. Without monitoring, inequality becomes easier to deny.

The tension, then, is not whether to monitor, but how monitoring is done, and whose knowledge it privileges.

In youth work practice, this tension is lived daily. Practitioners are asked to evidence inclusion and impact using tools that may undermine young people's agency over their own identities. The agenda is often set by funders and policy institutions, rather than co-produced with the communities being measured.

### **A comparative lens: lessons from South Africa**

South Africa's post-Apartheid transition offers a useful comparative lens for thinking about this dilemma.

In the early transition, the ideal of non-racialism sought to break away from Apartheid's racial ordering by rejecting race as a basis for citizenship. Over time, however, this gave way to a multicultural vision, popularised through the metaphor of the "Rainbow Nation", which continued to recognise racial difference. It recognised that addressing historical injustice required using race-based policies.

While necessary for redress, these policies also revealed a familiar tension. Categories required to address historical injustices and undo inequality simultaneously risked fixing identity in ways that hardened boundaries and

generated new exclusions. Transitional policies designed to repair harm ended up reproducing former divisions and new forms of contestation (Bollaert, 2019).

The lesson here is not that categorisation is always wrong, but that identity systems introduced for justice can become sites of power, shaping who belongs, who is visible, and who remains marginal.

### **Questions for youth work and peacebuilding**

For youth work in Northern Ireland, this invites critical reflection rather than simple solutions:

- How do we ensure that monitoring frameworks do not silence young people whose identities do not sit neatly or fall outside inherited categories?
- What does it mean for positive peace if belonging is measured through externally imposed classifications?
- How might funders, policymakers and practitioners co-design approaches that recognise inequality without fixing identity?
- How do we centre young people's own narratives as legitimate forms of knowledge in peacebuilding systems?

Peacebuilding is not only enacted through programmes and projects. It is also embedded in the quiet architecture of systems, forms, categories, and indicators that shape what can be said, seen and funded.

If we are serious about building positive peace, then we need to ask not only what our monitoring shows, but what it does, and who it leaves unheard.

### **Invitation to respond**

This piece raises questions rather than answers. We invite practitioners, young people, funders and policymakers to respond:

- How do you experience equality monitoring in your own work?
- Where do you see it enabling justice, and where do you see it limiting belonging?

- What would a more participatory, decolonial approach to monitoring look like in practice?

We welcome reflections, challenges and examples from practice.

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