



## PRACTITIONER'S CORNER

### **HOW PUBLIC OPINION POLLS WERE USED IN SUPPORT OF THE NORTHERN IRELAND PEACE PROCESS<sup>1</sup>**

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#### ***Introduction***

Eight surveys of public opinion were conducted in support of the Northern Ireland peace process between April 1996 and May 2000. Critically, the questions for seven of these polls were drafted and agreed with the co-operation of party negotiators to enhance the peace process by increasing party inclusiveness, developing issues and language, testing party policies, helping to set deadlines and increase the overall transparency of negotiations through the publication of technical analysis and media reports. This paper briefly reviews the principle findings of these polls; their role in the political development and implementation of the Belfast Agreement; the qualitative and quantitative methods used; and finally how the lessons from this work might now be applied to the resolution of conflicts elsewhere.

#### ***The Northern Ireland Peace Polls<sup>3</sup>***

##### Poll 1 - Peace Building and Public Policy<sup>4</sup>

The first poll was conducted as a piece of pure research that explored various policy options for improving relations between the two communities in Northern Ireland. Topics covered included: housing, education, parades, Irish language, policing and political development. As far as the peace process was concerned, the poll demonstrated the validity of the methods, the independence of the research and the value of publication in the popular press. Subsequently, the political parties elected to take part in the Stormont Talks all agreed to participate in a similar program of research to address the problems they had to resolve.

##### Poll 2 - After the Elections<sup>5</sup>

The second poll was conducted in March and published in April 1997 to help set a context for an invigorated Talks process after the May Parliamentary elections in the UK. Some general problems were dealt with as well as procedural questions about decommissioning and the participation of parties with paramilitary associations. In general, the electorate wanted All Party Talks with a minimum of preconditions. Sinn Féin were subsequently allowed into the Talks by the new Labour government after the May elections.

##### Poll 3 - The Stormont Talks<sup>6</sup>

The Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) and United Kingdom Unionist Party (UKUP) said they would not stay in the Talks with Sinn Féin present and the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) said they would consult with the 'grass roots' of their party before deciding if they would stay in or not. If they had walked away from the Talks, the negotiations would

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<sup>1</sup> For a detailed review of all the issues raised in this contribution, see Irwin (forthcoming).

<sup>2</sup> Colin Irwin's research is supported with grants from the Queen's University of Belfast Foundation and the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust. The fieldwork for the public opinion polls was undertaken by Market Research Northern Ireland.

<sup>3</sup> For a more detailed review see Irwin (1999a) and Irwin (2000a).

<sup>4</sup> Irwin (1996a-g) and Hadden, Irwin and Boal (1996).

<sup>5</sup> Irwin (1997a-g).

<sup>6</sup> Irwin (1997h-i).

have collapsed with no Unionist participation. The third poll, conducted in September 1997, demonstrated public support for the peace process and for continued Unionist participation. The Ulster Unionists subsequently decided to stay in the talks, but refused to engage in 'face to face' negotiations with Sinn Féin.

#### Poll 4 - In Search of a Settlement<sup>7</sup>

While all these political negotiations were going on and the official Talks were stuck on procedural issues, all the parties continued to negotiate substantive issues through the public opinion poll process. Thus, in December 1997, a fourth poll was conducted on all the substantive issues and was published in January 1998 in an effort to move the Talks process forward. After increased violence over the Christmas period, this effort proved to be successful and most of the parties started to negotiate in earnest with the exception of Sinn Féin, who held firm to a 'non-partitionist' settlement that excluded the possibility of a regional assembly for Northern Ireland.

#### Poll 5 - A Comprehensive Settlement<sup>8</sup>

With the DUP and UKUP outside the Talks and Sinn Féin not willing to actively negotiate, a test 'package' was agreed by the remaining seven parties and a survey conducted in March 1998. The poll also included alternatives put forward by the DUP, UKUP and Sinn Féin. This survey of public opinion proved to be critical as it demonstrated the lack of cross party support for the extreme Unionist and Republican proposals while the center ground settlement agreed to by the seven remaining parties could win support if put to the people of Northern Ireland in a referendum. Subsequently, on 22 May 1998, seventy one percent of the population voted in favour of the *Belfast Agreement*.

#### Poll 6 - Implementation of the Belfast Agreement<sup>9</sup>

The details of the new institutions of government were agreed in a vote of the New Northern Ireland Assembly on 16 February 1999, but the Unionists refused to sit in an Executive with Sinn Féin prior to decommissioning. In an effort to overcome these difficulties, a poll was conducted in collaboration with the Assembly parties representing the principal paramilitary groups - Sinn Féin and the Progressive Unionist Party (PUP). The results were published on 3 and 4 March 1999. Over 90% of the people of Northern Ireland wanted the peace process to succeed and were willing to have their political representatives reach an accommodation to achieve this outcome.

#### Poll 7 - The Mitchell Review<sup>10</sup>

Unfortunately, the negotiations of that summer failed with the Unionists refusing to take up their ministerial posts in the absence of a hand-over of weapons. Faced with a political 'stand off', Senator George Mitchell was persuaded to undertake a review, and another poll was conducted in support of these negotiations. It did not produce any remarkably new results, but on this occasion all the pro-agreement parties were involved. Critically, the Ulster Unionists now took the results of the poll seriously and a 'step by step' program for implementation was agreed.

#### Poll 8 - The Future of the Peace Process<sup>11</sup>

Although the Mitchell Review moved the Northern Ireland peace process forward by creating conditions in which the Executive could be established, the hardening of both Ulster Unionist and IRA attitudes towards the question of decommissioning forced a suspension of the Executive in February of 2000. In addition to repeating all the

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<sup>7</sup> Irwin (1998a-i).

<sup>8</sup> Irwin (1998j-m).

<sup>9</sup> Irwin (1999b-f).

<sup>10</sup> Irwin (1999g-h).

<sup>11</sup> Irwin (2000b).



contextual peace process questions asked in the Mitchell Review poll, the most recent in this series of polls also tested the two governments' new proposals for decommissioning that entailed 'placing arms beyond use'. The poll demonstrated grass roots Ulster Unionist support for these new proposals, and the Ulster Unionist Council subsequently voted to take their party back into government with Sinn Féin.

The public opinion polls, although the most visible aspect of this approach to conflict resolution, were not an end in themselves, the process of poll making was equally important. As a program of independent research, the parties were encouraged to take the drafting of the questions, the timing of the polls and the publication of the results in any direction that they believed would be helpful to the advancement of the peace process. It was a collective enterprise that they could use as they saw fit until the new institutions of government created under the terms of the Belfast Agreement would render such work superfluous to political requirements.

### ***Polling as Peace-Building***

Effective peace-building requires the re-establishment of all those elements of a society that make it a functioning success. In the first instance, an absence of dialogue between the conflicting parties must be replaced with reliable channels of communication that can facilitate an honest discourse on all the issues that lie at the heart of the conflict. Secondly, once the talking has begun in earnest, discussion must lead to real negotiations and decision making on each element of an agreement that provides remedies for every failed social practice and inoperative political institution. Finally, once the agreement is reached, it must be implemented in full, with as much rigor, care and attention to success as the negotiations themselves. Peace-building requires both vigilance and patience and in this the support of all of the elements of the society and the international community must be encouraged to play a constructive role if a return to violence and war is to be avoided.

The Northern Ireland peace polls were used to enhance all of these essential processes by helping to establish real dialogue and effective communications; explore problems and their solutions; define the critical issues and associated questions; and last, but by no means least, help to keep the peace process on track by facilitating a discourse in which the society as a whole could play a part in the decision making process. But the emphasis here is on 'enhance' and 'help'. Public opinion polls alone can not bring about change. They can only assist and facilitate in a process that must, in the end, be done by the people and their elected representatives. Here is a list of some practical 'Dos and Don'ts' that came out of the Northern Ireland peace polls:

#### ***Some Practical 'Dos And Don'ts'***

- Cover all major aspects of social and political life affected by public institutions and government departments.
- Put together an interdisciplinary research team as required.
- Encourage key decision makers to become involved in drafting the questions and designing the methodology.
- If politicians disagree with the results, invite them to help design the next survey to their satisfaction.
- Undertake a program of pure research to demonstrate the independence and validity of the work.
- Do not exclude any serious parties.

- If the large established parties do not show willingness, try the small centre parties first.
- Secure independent funding.
- Start with some simple confidence building questions.
- Deal with procedural and then substantive issues.
- Try to eliminate extreme options as well as finding common ground.
- It is worth noting that several questions that had been drafted and agreed could not be run in some polls for lack of space. This was not entirely a bad thing as it provided a working foundation for later polls.
- Systematically deal with all preconditions and objections to a peace process – people generally want ‘jaw jaw’ in preference to ‘war war’.
- Do not avoid sensitive issues because others might take on those same questions in a less helpful way that is potentially more damaging.
- Give ‘the people’ every opportunity to exercise their democratic franchise – they like it – and the results should send a message to their elected politicians.
- Devise questions that can produce a ranking of the major problems in a conflict and their potential solutions.
- Develop questions that include all of the potential elements of a final agreement.
- Do not be put off by complexity. The people living with a conflict often have a very sophisticated understanding of that conflict.
- Use a method of analysis that reflects the voting procedures used in the negotiations proper.
- Test comprehensive agreements as a ‘package’ as many of its problematic elements will be acceptable as part of a balanced settlement.
- ‘Underline’ the politically unacceptable alternatives to a comprehensive settlement when it is opportune to do so.
- Timing is of the essence. For example, the ‘Comprehensive Settlement’ poll would have been almost useless if run months before the parties were ready to ‘cut a deal’ or the day after the talks collapsed!
- Try to retain control over funding so that the parties involved with the polls will not be able to exercise a veto if they think the work is not going to go their way.
- Don’t use public opinion polls to renegotiate agreements.
- Don’t assume the work is over once the deal is signed, particularly if many of the issues raised in the research are not dealt with in the agreement!
- Even when a very difficult decision has to be made, try and include all the critical parties to that decision - however difficult that makes the work.
- When key players refuse to negotiate, use neutral parties to feed in constructive suggestions.
- When key players introduce questions designed to produce an unhelpful result, get neutral parties to critique the value of such questions.
- Design and run ‘cold shower’ questions when the point of ‘do it or lose it’ is reached.
- When support for running a public opinion poll is ‘mixed’, consult widely and do not be afraid to temporarily poll against the wishes of some parties.
- Have an experienced board or advisory group at hand to back up difficult polling decisions.
- Review the work done and progress made when it is opportune to do so.
- Let the parties decide when to run the last poll.

### ***The Drafting of Consensus***

Perhaps the single most important feature of the Northern Ireland peace polls was the participation of the parties to the Stormont Talks in their design and, in particular, their



collective agreement of the questions being asked. But this consensus was not arrived at easily. It required the development of both new styles of questions and methods of working with party negotiators through successive drafts that facilitated the anonymous exploration of all possible solutions to problems. The success of the polls was totally dependent on the success of this qualitative dimension of the research. The computer operator's dictum '*garbage in - garbage out*' applies equally to the work undertaken here and its corollary '*carefully phrased and thoughtful question in - relevant and useful solution to problem out*' was the objective that had to be achieved. The value of the public opinion surveys was a direct function of the care and attention given to asking the right questions and it was to this end that the greatest resources were applied. Running a poll would normally take several weeks while the design of the questionnaire would often take as many months. In practice, the work undertaken to produce an acceptable draft questionnaire went through the following stages:

1. A letter was sent out to all parties inviting them to participate in the design and running of a public opinion poll in support of the peace process.
2. At an initial meeting with party officers a party negotiator would be assigned to the task and issues relating to methods, topics, timing and publication would be discussed.
3. An outline or 'first draft' questionnaire would be sent out to the party contacts for discussion purposes with a covering letter that summarised the views of parties with regard to methods, topics, timing and publication. This letter would also contain a list of the party contacts so that they would be free to discuss any matters arising with each other.
4. The second and subsequent meetings with party representatives would review the draft questionnaire to register party requests for changes and additions.
5. The third and subsequent letter and draft questionnaire noted all requests for changes and additions. For the sake of clarity footnotes would be removed relating to previous drafts so that all notes referred only to current alterations.
6. When the questionnaire started to 'stabilise' it would be sent out for pre-testing to identify fieldwork difficulties relating to problems of comprehension and length. The parties were notified that this stage in the work had been reached and that they should identify any final changes they might like as well as indicating which questions could possibly be left out to be dealt with in a later poll if so required.
7. Final changes were made by those running the poll on the evidence of objective fieldwork tests. These changes were noted in the final draft which was sent to all the parties with a covering letter detailing the survey research schedule and publication date.
8. From this point onwards, parties were not permitted to interfere in any way with the program of research, analysis of data and publication. However, they did receive full statistical reports and were free to make criticisms of the findings if they so wished.

Frequently the work of drafting questions went down 'blind alleys', became pedantic or even party personal, occasionally leading to frustrations and recriminations. At such times, the drafting became more than just an intellectual exercise designed to find solutions to social and political problems. It was also a medium through which all matters of concern could be raised and commented on, and if the matter could not be resolved privately, then the issue could still be tested before the arbiter of public

opinion. But when it was done and everyone had had their say, the results were taken seriously and did affect the decision making process because the questions asked were the ones the parties wanted answers to.

### ***The Calculus of Agreement***

The Northern Ireland peace polls were undertaken with the expressed intention of mapping out the details of a settlement or implementation arrangements that the politicians and their supporters could live with. Different types of questions can be drafted to achieve different positive outcomes. They can be used to build confidence in the peace process, prioritise problems and solutions, eliminate extreme positions, map out common ground and areas of compromise and test comprehensive agreements as packages. Some of these questions were very simple requiring just 'Yes/No' answers, while others were very complex because they contained many parts or began with an extensive preamble that was provided to allow the person being interviewed an opportunity to give an informed response. In consultation with the parties, a five-point scale was devised in which the person being interviewed would be asked if a certain option was 'Essential', 'Desirable', 'Acceptable', 'Tolerable' or 'Unacceptable'. Working definitions for these terms were agreed by all the parties and were presented to the interviewee, in the 'Search for a Settlement' poll, as follows:

'Most of the remainder of this questionnaire will present you with various options on what could be the different parts of a settlement.

For each option you will be asked to indicate which ones you consider to be 'Essential', 'Desirable', 'Acceptable', 'Tolerable' or 'Unacceptable'.

For the purposes of this poll 'Essential', 'Desirable', 'Acceptable', 'Tolerable' and 'Unacceptable' mean:

**'Essential'** - *You believe this option is a necessary part of a lasting settlement and should be implemented under any circumstances.*

**'Desirable'** - *This option is not what you would consider to be 'Essential', but you think this option, or something very similar to it, is a good idea and should be put into practice.*

**'Acceptable'** - *This option is not what you would consider to be 'Desirable', if you were given a choice, but you could certainly 'live with it'.*

**'Tolerable'** - *This option is not what you want. But, as part of a lasting settlement for Northern Ireland, you would be willing to put up with it.*

**'Unacceptable'** - *This option is completely unacceptable under any circumstances. You would not accept it, even as part of a lasting settlement.*

You may use each of the terms 'Essential', 'Desirable', 'Acceptable', 'Tolerable' and 'Unacceptable' as many times as you wish in each question.'

For example the first question in one of the polls that included a section on human rights was written as follows:



## Protecting the Rights of the People of Northern Ireland The European Convention on Human Rights

The European Convention on Human Rights protects individuals by guaranteeing each person:

*The right ...*

*To life.*

*Not to be tortured or subjected to inhuman or degrading treatment.*

*To protection from slavery or forced work.*

*Not to be unlawfully arrested or detained.*

*To a fair trial.*

*To freedom of belief and expression.*

*To free association.*

*To privacy and family life.*

*Not to be discriminated against.*

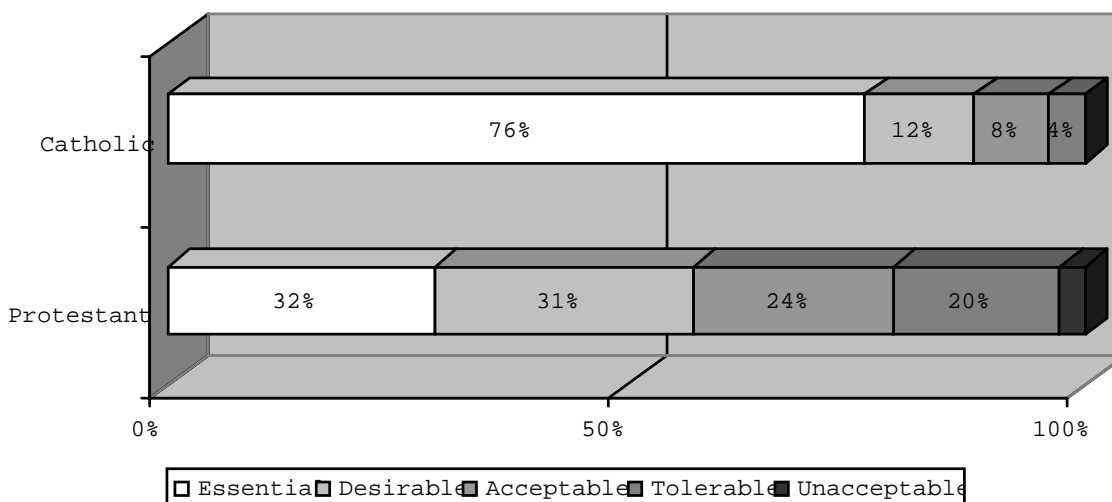
*To a remedy for breaches of human rights.*

The new Labour government plan to introduce this Convention into the domestic law of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. This will allow any complaints regarding failures to meet these minimum standards to be heard by courts in the UK and Northern Ireland. Do you think this is 'Essential', 'Desirable', 'Acceptable', 'Tolerable' or 'Unacceptable'.

	Essential	Desirable	Acceptable	Tolerable	Unacceptable
The European Convention on Human Rights should be part of the domestic law of Northern Ireland.					

The analysis of these questions was undertaken using a variant of the voting system used in the talks themselves. 'Sufficient Consensus' requires that a majority from each community agree the final settlement (50 per cent + one of Nationalists and 50 per cent + one of Unionists). In the poll, if more than 50 per cent from each community considered an option 'Essential', 'Desirable', 'Acceptable', or 'Tolerable', then it was a potential 'winner', but if more than 50 per cent considered an option 'Unacceptable',

**Figure 1.** Protestant and Catholic support for the Option 'The European Convention on Human Rights should be a part of the domestic law of Northern Ireland'.



then that option was considered problematic. It might have to be discarded or 'horse traded' for another 'Unacceptable' option. Thus, the results for the above question on human rights can be presented as illustrated in Figure 1.

In addition to hundreds of questions and options drafted in this way, some very simple 'Yes/No' questions were also used with the expressed intention of producing a headline in the local press. For example, 'Do you want the Belfast Agreement to work?' - 93 per cent said 'Yes'. This question was asked in the last three polls and got a headline and front-page story in the *Belfast Telegraph* on 3 March 1999. However, this simple question was preceded by a more complex one that asked the person being interviewed which elements of the Belfast Agreement they considered to be 'Very Important', 'Important', 'Of Some Importance', 'Of Little Importance' or 'Of No Importance' at all. In previous polls, people had similarly been asked how 'Significant' they considered various causes of 'The Troubles' to be and how 'Important' they thought various steps were for resolving these problems. Then, by simply taking the percentage response to the first option 'Very Significant' and ranking the results in order of the perceived causes of 'The Troubles', for Protestants and Catholics respectively, Table 1 was produced. This methodology objectively presented the major concerns of the two communities that needed to be dealt with if the Belfast Agreement was to translate into a successful peace process. There can be no doubt that a very great deal has been accomplished but, clearly, the Northern Ireland peace process still has quite a long way to go.<sup>12</sup>

**Table 1 Protestant and Catholic perceptions of the causes of 'The Troubles'**

	Protestant	Very Significant	Catholic	Very Significant
1st	The Irish Republican Army and their use of violence.	87%	The Lack of equality and continued discrimination.	71%
2nd	All paramilitary groups and their use of violence.	67%	The sectarian division of Northern Ireland politics.	66%
3rd	The failure of government and the security forces to deal with terrorism.	56%	The failure to provide a police service acceptable to all.	62%
4th	The Republic's territorial claim on Northern Ireland.	53%	The failures of Northern Ireland politicians.	59%
5th	The Loyalist paramilitaries and their use of violence.	53%	A lack of respect for the people of the 'other' tradition.	57%
6th	The Republic of Ireland's involvement in Northern Ireland.	42%	The Loyalist paramilitaries and their use of violence.	57%
7th	The failures of Northern Ireland politicians.	31%	All paramilitary groups and their use of violence.	56%
8th	Unaccountable and secretive government.	31%	Unaccountable and secretive government.	52%
9th	A lack of respect for the people of the 'other' tradition.	30%	The continued British presence on the island of Ireland.	51%
10th	The sectarian division of Northern Ireland politics.	30%	The British Army and their use of violence.	48%
11th	The prominent role of the Roman Catholic Church.	29%	The Irish Republican Army and their use of violence.	45%
12th	Segregated education.	25%	The failure of government and the security forces to deal with terrorism.	34%
13th	Segregated public housing.	22%	Segregated public housing.	33%
14th	The Lack of equality and continued discrimination.	21%	Segregated education.	31%

<sup>12</sup> Irwin (2001a-c).





15th	The British Government's pursuit of a political settlement.	20%	The British Government's pursuit of a political settlement.	23%
16th	The continued British presence on the island of Ireland.	17%	The Republic's territorial claim on Northern Ireland.	21%
17th	The 'Established Church' in Britain and the Orange Order.	14%	The 'Established Church' in Britain and the Orange Order.	21%
18th	The failure to provide a police service acceptable to all.	9%	The Republic of Ireland's involvement in Northern Ireland.	16%
19th	The British Army and their use of violence.	6%	The prominent role of the Roman Catholic Church.	10%

## **Conclusion**

In principle it is to be hoped that the methods reviewed here can be applied to assist any society that has fallen victim to a break down of constructive democratic dialogue and effective decision-making processes. In practice, these methods would be difficult to use where basic rights to freedom of speech and association are not available. But then again there are perhaps tens or even hundreds of situations around the world where the methods used here could be applied with the intention and hope of saving lives<sup>13</sup> and perhaps hundreds or even thousands of situations around the world where less extreme situations could benefit from similar efforts with a view to preventing social harm.<sup>14</sup> Wherever conflicts of interest between groups, communities, peoples and states are not being resolved for a lack of effective dialogue, decision making and social and political action, perhaps the methods described here should at least be tried.

With this point in mind, a 'peace polls check list', derived from the Northern Ireland experience, is given below. It is intended to be a practical place from which to make a start. Hopefully, in time, others will refine and add to it. With the collaboration of willing students to undertake the interviews, a personal computer to process the results, and access to the internet for publication almost any social scientist could replicate the methods used in Northern Ireland in an effort to sow the seeds of their own peace process. With greater resources and appropriate political support it must be hoped that peace itself could be an achievable goal.

## **Peace Polls Check List**

### General Research Background

- Which Universities in the region have strong social science departments?
- Which academics have experience with surveys of public opinion in the region and have an interest in a peace process?
- Which academics could give additional support from departments of politics, law, social geography, languages, media studies and so on?
- Which NGOs and IGOs have an interest in the region and could give financial and research policy support?
- Which market research companies operate in the region and have undertaken polls amongst the relevant communities?
- What polling has been done on a peace process?
- What is the demographic profile of the relevant groups to the conflict in terms of total population, social geography, language, education, age and so on?
- Which newspapers are pro-peace process?

<sup>13</sup> For reviews of violent conflicts around the world see Schmid (1997), and Harff and Gurr (1998).

<sup>14</sup> For a review of group conflicts in general see Minority Rights Group (1997).

- Which newspapers have a cross community readership and/or will sometimes publish reports in cooperation with newspapers from other communities?

#### General Research Action

- Design, run and publish a public opinion poll on confidence building measures, the desire of the people for a negotiated settlement and some initial suggestions for an agreement from as wide a range of political perspectives as is possible.

#### Applied Research Background

- Which political parties have a democratic mandate?
- Which political parties represent radical, moderate and center polices?
- Which political parties represent groups in conflict?
- Which political parties are essential to a successful peace process?
- Contact the parties that must make the peace and the parties who are willing to do most to achieve peace and invite them all to participate in a program of polling research in support of a peace process.

#### Applied Research Action

- Agree a program of polling research with these parties including: topics to be dealt with, methods (sample structure, size, distribution, languages to be used and so on), research ethics, timing and publication.
- In cooperation with the parties test all options for confidence building measures, problems and solutions, procedural and substantive matters, and contextual concerns of the public in relation to the conflict - all as may be required.
- Publish results in the popular press, on the internet and in detailed reports to the parties and relevant IGOs, NGOs and governments who can, and hopefully will, give political and economic support to a peace process.
- Continue to give support to the parties until the implementation of an agreement is well advanced, the reformed institutions are functioning as planned and most of the more difficult problems identified in the research have been dealt with.

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