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ARK Policy Brief

Ethnic Diversity and Environmental Leadership in Northern Ireland

Jonny Hanson, Ann Marie Gray, Lori Gatsi-Barnett and Takura Makoni

Society in Northern Ireland (NI) is becoming more ethnically diverse (Gray et al., 2023). After a long period of political instability, it is also beginning to seriously address its interlinked environmental challenges (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs [DAERA], 2024), most visible in the recent toxic algal blooms in Lough Neagh. However, ethnic diversity and environmental leadership have rarely been considered in tandem in NI. A policy roundtable organised by ARK in collaboration with ACSONI (African and Caribbean Support Organisation Northern Ireland) aimed to do just that. This took place at ArtsEkta, Belfast, in March 2025. Participants at the roundtable mostly included minority ethnic representatives from a diverse range of stakeholders, mainly from civil society organisations.

Participants were asked to consider the issue of ethnic diversity and the environment, focusing firstly on the Environmental Improvement Plan's six strategic environmental outcomes (DAERA, 2024). Subsequent issues explored at the roundtable included ethnic diversity and the urban environment, especially via Belfast City Council's (BCC) Segregation and the Environment report, and ethnic diversity and the environmental sector in NI, particularly the Change Begins With Us report (NI Environment Link [NIEL] and Community Relations Council [CRC], 2022). However, participants were first asked to consider their personal vision for NI's environment, writing down the first three words that came to mind. Figure 1 shows that 'thriving', 'healthy' and 'sustainable' were the three most frequently mentioned.

Figure 1: Vision for Northern Ireland's environment

Ethnic diversity and the environment

Policymaking in NI has often occurred in silos. The continued and significant progress in peacebuilding and good relations, particularly since the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement in 1998, has rarely factored in environmental issues (Hanson and Walsh, 2024). Similarly, environmental policy has only considered peacebuilding and good relations issues sporadically (Hanson and Gray, 2024). Changes, however, are afoot.

The Northern Ireland Peace Monitoring Report: Number Six (Gray et al., 2023), for instance, noted the importance of continuing to broaden the definition, functionality and application of good relations to minority ethnic communities, in addition to the traditional ethno-religious categories. That report also referenced climate change 12 times, stressing that 'dealing with broader structural issues [in Northern Ireland] will require stronger linkages between economic, social and environmental policies.' Furthermore, various recent environmental reports, including one discussed in the next section of this Policy Brief, have emphasised the importance of addressing good relations and environmental topics in tandem (BCC, 2024; Hanson and Gray, 2024; Hanson and Walsh, 2024).

The first Environmental Improvement Plan for Northern Ireland, published in late 2024 (DAERA, 2024) is a welcome and important signal of environmental leadership in and by NI. It sets out a compelling and vital vision for a flourishing NI across six strategic environmental outcomes (Table 1). However, it makes no mention of ethnic inclusion specifically, or of good relations more broadly. As society in NI becomes more ethnically diverse, considering a wide range of perspectives on the causes of and solutions to environmental challenges is an important consideration.

Table 1: Strategic Environmental Outcomes in the Environmental Improvement Plan for Northern Ireland

#	Strategic Environmental Outcome
1	Excellent Air, Water & Land Quality
2	Healthy & Accessible Environment & Landscapes Everyone Can Connect With & Enjoy
3	Thriving, Resilient & Connected Nature & Wildlife
4	Sustainable Production & Consumption On Land & At Sea
5	Zero Waste & Highly Developed Circular Economy
6	Net Zero GHG [Greenhouse Gas] Emissions & Improved Climate Resilience & Adaptability

Source: DAERA, 2024

Roundtable participants considered the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of/for/to the Environmental Improvement Plan's strategic environmental outcomes, especially in relation to ethnic diversity. There was consensus that one of the strengths is having an improvement plan that proposes change, but it was noted that it was likely that change is not going to happen quickly. It was felt that the plan did set out a good vision regarding nature and wildlife, although the discussion did generate questions about what is envisaged in terms of space and what would count as nature and wildlife 'that is thriving'. A number of issues were raised relating to the boundaries and specifics of the plan and its implementation. There was strong support for the suggestion that the scope of what is considered environmental inclusion needs to be broader. A range of concerns were raised about the inclusiveness of environmental policies and initiatives with several issues of accessibility raised, especially regarding problems with access to rural spaces, including but not limited to transport barriers.

Many participants spoke of the under use of existing resources and missed opportunities to improve the ecosystems of urban spaces. Shared gardens in the city were argued to be an example of this. The point was made that these are mainly neglected yet could be spaces where nature can flourish. There were also some examples of businesses/local communities coming together to create green spaces, although it was argued that there are too few opportunities in the city and working with people often involves taking them to more rural settings.

Linked to arguments about the need to make more effective use of existing resources, was a strongly argued point that the knowledge and expertise of people coming to NI to live is not recognised or used enough. Many examples were given of people with specialist environmental and agricultural knowledge and experience (examples given included expert knowledge of grass seed and of orchards) who do not have the opportunity to contribute. The reasons for this include qualifications not being recognised, the value of their experience not understood or appreciated, and marginalisation. Rather than seeing and valuing the skills and knowledge people have, labels of 'asylum seeker' or 'refugee' are attached to them with little effort to look beyond those. Failure to tap into this wealth of knowledge from people who are acutely attuned to the balance between people and nature limits what can be achieved.

Additional barriers to progress were identified as problems relating to policy making in NI, including siloed working between and within government departments, a poor track record in addressing complex or 'wicked' problems, and low trust in government and in governance structures in NI. It was stressed that the effective governance of initiatives and the bodies responsible for them will be key to success. There was strong agreement that more genuine, and inclusive, citizen participation within boards and institutional design will be needed to accommodate this. A number of barriers to prioritising environmental issues and more inclusive policy making and implementation were identified. Among these was the challenge of bringing alternative and different voices into discussions traditionally dominated by a powerful farming lobby and the perceived allegiance of many policy makers to that sector; the internal struggles and tensions within DAERA between agricultural and environmental issues, with some participants expressing a lack of trust in government at all levels to really take positive environmental action; and the struggle to get discussion of the environmental damage of some forms of farming onto the agenda at all.

While there was a high degree of scepticism about the adequacy and likely success of current policies, some grounds for optimism were identified. One was the potential opportunities presented by local authority good relations programmes and targets. Another positive was that there are a lot of communities working on regenerative farming, and so bringing them into the conversation will benefit policy and provide opportunities for inclusion. It was also argued that the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE) could be reaching out to people with expertise, although there is a perception of it being 'closed' to alternative voices, which needs to be addressed. On a practical and important note, the point was made that, especially for people coming into NI, it is impossible to get small packages of land for growing crops and that there is no support from DAERA on this issue.

Ethnic diversity and the urban environment

Access to the environment by minority ethnic communities in urban areas has been the subject of some attention in policy documents. A report on the future of urban green spaces in NI mentioned 'good relations' twice and 'ethnic' four times (NIEL et al., 2023). Under its over-arching aim of 'A Joined-Up Approach', and as part of its second pillar of 'Access and Inclusivity', one of its key principles of 'Access for All' envisions that 'Our urban

green spaces should be inclusive and welcoming to everyone - advocating environmental justice across age groups, backgrounds and cultures'. As part of the wider project, a minority ethnic case study on urban green space access and use by 11 individuals was conducted by a student attached to the Chinese Welfare Association (He, 2023). Recommendations include a focus on safety, transport, activity programmes and architectural features, among others, to improve minority ethnic access and engagement.

However, the recent BCC report, Segregation and the Environment: Breaking Down Barriers (BCC, 2024) is much more explicit and focused on ethnic diversity and the environment in Belfast specifically, as part of a wider focus on good relations and the environment in the city. It makes numerous recommendations for increasing minority ethnic environmental leadership and access in Belfast. The report mentions 'ethnic' seven times, in its main text and in its recommendations; these are all listed in Table 2.

Table 2: Key minority ethnic community references in 'Segregation and the Environment: Breaking Down Barriers' report

Page	Section/theme	Minority ethnic community reference
8	Segregation	There is a link identified between poor environmental quality and deprivation and that includes racial inequality and lack of involvement of people from minority ethnic backgrounds at high enough levels within government and civil society working on environmental issues.
9	Segregation & environmental justice	Equitable involvement on environmental issues – with people from minority ethnic backgrounds and lower income thresholds less likely to be involved in environment organisations, and other issue-based voluntary and community sector organisations.
22	Climate & resilience	People from minority ethnic backgrounds may be less involved in the community sector and in environmental organisations than others.
23	Direction	The issue of segregation is therefore also relevant to whether and how working class and ethnic minority communities have equal access to green spaces.
24	Direction & environmental justice	Environmental justice issues are relevant and contribute to the discussion over segregation. This includes access to green space in inner city areas, the impact of roads, such as the Westlink, and the engagement of minority communities, including people from a minority ethnic background, in decision-making on these issues.
26	Belfast City Council segregation & the environment programme	Four priority projects within the programme are outlined in the appendix and include: • an eco-schools project; • planting and re-wilding at an interface or peace barrier; • minority ethnic and leadership facilitation; and • a youth carbon initiative. How these ideas are developed and supported during the next financial years will be consistent with The Executive Office's T:BUC strategy, as well as council strategies including the Belfast Agenda, PEACE Programme and racial equality strategy. Projects should be delivered in partnership with other public agencies and the community sector.
27	Appendix 1: Recommended ideas & actions	Environment Justice: Recruit and train migrant and minority ethnic volunteers to participate in and sit on committees of environment organisations.

Source: BCC, 2024

Participants at the roundtable discussed the extent to which the above publications, in particular the findings and recommendations from BCC's Breaking Down Barriers report, improve ethnic environmental access and leadership in urban areas in Northern Ireland. A number of people were positive about the broad ideas and sentiments expressed in the BCC report and others. They welcomed references to the need for a stronger focus on the equitable inclusion of low income families and ethnic minorities. However, given the absence of a formal methodology section within the BCC report, there was some uncertainty among participants about the nature and extent of consultation, especially with minority ethnic stakeholders.

Furthermore, those taking part in the roundtable were clear that a fundamental foundation for achieving ethnic diversity in environmental leadership is that people feel they are welcome, valued and have a sense of belonging. This requires government (at all levels) recognising the nature and degree of segregation (not just religious segregation but divisions linked to income and ethnicity). Feelings of ownership are pivotal to people investing in a space. A key question then is what more can be done to unite good relations and environmental concerns. Attention was again drawn to specific initiatives which presented opportunities for greater involvement of local minority ethnic communities – for example, the North Belfast Waterworks project and the Alexandra Park project, also in Belfast. A recurrent theme in the discussion was how many of the plans and ideas are dominated by professionals with inadequate or token engagement with communities with insufficient consideration of safety and shared space.

The discussion broadened to include what actions are being or could be taken by other bodies outside of central/local government. It was noted that the Ulster Folk Museum, for instance, now had an environmental focus to its work, including opportunities for conservation volunteers on the site, although its location in an affluent area limited ability to compete for some funding. It was also noted that conversations were being held with organisations like the National Trust regarding access for low income people. The point was made that opportunities could also be made available for previously excluded or silenced groups to have a greater say in the design and curating of museum displays and initiatives.

Many points identified the need for more creative thinking on how to implement some of the vision set out in various documents, including Breaking Down Barriers, such as the need to give people examples of everyday actions that can be environmentally beneficial. Other suggestions related to the value of storytelling in community engagement, with the example of the Irish Linen Centre/Lisburn Museum's Yours, Mine and Ours project, which drew on the tradition of textile making held by some minority ethnic women.

Ethnic diversity and the environmental sector

Across the United Kingdom (UK), the environmental sector is one of the least ethnically-diverse sectors, despite the strong association between cultural and biological diversity across the world and throughout human history. A 2022 report on the issue noted that environmental professions were in the bottom 10 in terms of ethnic diversity (Students Organising for Sustainability [SOS], 2022). Ethnically-diverse student respondents were more likely to cite low pay as a barrier to working in the sector, for example, and more likely to highlight the importance of addressing global issues like climate change as a motivation to consider an environmental career.

In NI, an in-depth report - Change Starts With Us: Increasing Minority Ethnic Participation in the Northern Ireland Environment Sector - by the Northern Ireland Environment Link (NIEL) and the Community Relations Council (CRC) explored the topic of ethnic diversity and the environmental sector through surveys and focus groups with environmental and minority ethnic organisations alike (NIEL and CRC, 2022). Table 3 summarises its key recommendations. Progress has been made on implementing many of the recommendations as part of the NIEL Strategy 2024-6, under the 'Equitable and Accessible' strategic priority (NIEL, 2024; B. Frazer, pers comm).

Table 3: Summary of recommendations from the 'Change Starts With Us: Increasing Minority Ethnic Participation in the Northern Ireland Environment Sector' report.

#	Recommendation
5.1	Provide environmental **sector coordination** in relation to increasing minority ethnic engagement, principally through the employment of a designated staff member
5.2	**Raise awareness** amongst the environmental sector on the relevance and importance of meaningful minority ethic community engagement and participation
5.3	Develop and deliver **training and capacity building** on topics including: unconscious bias; minority ethnic inclusion; volunteer development; relevant policy and legislation
5.4	Develop and provide **guidance and advice** on a range of relevant issues including data, monitoring, employment, recruitment, volunteering, etc.
5.5	Develop and harness a range of programmes to support **leaders** in developing knowledge, time, space, resources and shared practice on this issue
5.6	Build **relationships and co-design** between environmental and minority ethnic community organisations, especially through collaborative partnerships
5.7	NIEL [Northern Ireland Environment Link] ideally to lead on a coordinated approach to **funders** to avoid environmental organisations competing for the same limited funds

Source: NIEL and CRC, 2022

Nevertheless, among roundtable participants there was some pessimism that some of the main recommendations from Change Starts With Us, particularly the hiring of a designated staff member, had not been progressed. In summing up what would facilitate improvements in implementation, the focus returned to the need to recognise different indigenous-based knowledge types, in addition to 'Western' scientific knowledge. While participants acknowledged that 'lived experience' is a much used, and indeed abused phase, it is important to understand what can be harnessed by lived experience. The same applies to co-production, with the potential for this to be more than another buzzword or tokenistic response. The use of the term 'capacity building' was seen as often inappropriate with participants arguing that people may not need capacity building but they do need access to decision making. This requires a willingness to open up spaces to 'other' knowledge and acknowledging the capacity and knowledge that people already have. An example was given of reference in a local government report to 'training people to sit on bodies'. Participants reflected on the premise of this statement and considered the framing of it to be a problem, particularly in the failure to acknowledge existing knowledge and capacity within minority ethnic communities. On the other hand, it was noted that genuine collaborative partnerships engage as many diverse people as possible, helping to reach more equitable outcomes.

There was frustration that minority ethnic people are often the 'last step', consulted only when policies are already made and projects designed. There was consensus that major issues of balance of power remain to be addressed, with a perception that those who ask too many difficult questions are not welcome at the table. It was acknowledged that there are some individuals within particular settings who are committed and very forward looking and that good work is not always very visible. In addition, it was felt that the media could do more to promote positive work going on and to encourage searching conversations. The point was made that while there will always be some people who want to block equitable practice, there are also many silent observers who just do not want to rock the boat. Fear of change, and a longstanding 'business as usual' approach focused on NI's two traditional communities, were also cited as barriers to inclusivity.

Conclusion

In summary, all participants at the roundtable felt that, whether they emanated from central government, local government or civil society, it was important to have good policies in place to promote ethnic diversity and environmental leadership in NI. However, a willingness to meaningfully consult on and implement these is critical, especially as this requires addressing the power dynamics within networks, organisations and society in NI. Overall, linking ethnic diversity and environmental leadership in NI is an important component of addressing good relations and environmental sustainability in tandem, instead of in silos. Considering minority ethnic perspectives on the environmental vision for NI, improving environmental access for these groups in urban areas especially and diversifying the environmental sector could all help to facilitate this goal. It also essential to note the importance of a collective, equitable and inclusive approach to addressing the equality principles of Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act (1998). Upholding a perspective that recognises and values all diverse groups and individuals without minimising or prioritising the significance of any above another can reinforce transparency and accountability. As in the natural world, where diverse ecosystems are more resilient (Rodrigues et al., 2025), diverse societies, with their myriad ways of thinking, being and doing, can contribute to the resilience necessary to face the considerable environmental challenges of the 21st century – in NI and beyond.

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