

New Trajectories for Peace in Northern Ireland

Discussion Paper

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Introduction

- This discussion paper outlines new trajectories for peacebuilding in Northern Ireland. It is not exhaustive but rather aims to provide, after a brief background, **a snapshot of the current peacebuilding context and key challenges**. It further **aims to stimulate discussion** about contemporary peacebuilding needs and asks whether a fresh approach is required.
- Many issues are summarised (such as the approach to peace funding) succinctly and, at times, polemically to enhance reflection and discussion.
- Although critical points are raised throughout, this is against a **backdrop of the relative success of the peace process and the 1998 Agreement** in reducing political violence and militarisation, creating relative stability, and developing local governance, albeit a government that has been haphazard and prone to collapse.
- The paper initially focuses on the SEUPB PEACE Programme.² This is not to diminish the contributions of the International Fund for Ireland (IFI)³ and Atlantic Philanthropies,⁴ However, this is outlined as background, as **the iterations of the PEACE Programme help illustrate how peacebuilding has been understood and evolved** over the years at the macro and governmental level.
- **The PEACE Programme embodies the tension between genuinely addressing underlying issues and social divisions as a primary focus of peacebuilding and attempts to ameliorate these through economic and development measures.** This tension has at times produced a muddled model of peacebuilding, with ramifications for the current context, hence the focus.
- **Using the PEACE Programme as a yardstick** for understanding peacebuilding (certainly at the political level) **raises several questions:**
 - Is the goal of peacebuilding one of 'thin' integration or deeper social transformation?
 - Is the aim of peacebuilding a society where dominant communities remain separate and equal, coexisting in (negative) peace?

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² <https://www.seupb.eu>

³ Over 30 years, until the end of September 2017, IFI invested some £728 million in peace. Over the period 2016-2020, IFI supported 115 projects across NI and the SBCs and invested £32m (£38.6m) in a wide range of peacebuilding initiatives through three key programmes: Peace Walls Programme (PWP), Peace Impact Programme (PIP) and the Personal Youth Development Programme (PYDP). See International Fund for Ireland. (2021). *Final evaluation report*. https://internationalfundforireland.com/images/documents/IFI_Final_Evaluation_Report.pdf.

⁴ From 1991 through 2016, Atlantic invested \$570 million in Northern Ireland to promote the peace process; see evaluations at <https://www.atlanticphilanthropies.org/featured-topics/atlantic-in-northern-ireland>

- Or should peacebuilding seek more profound change, where all aspects of life are integrated and transformed, and the underlying causes of the conflict are addressed?

History of Peacebuilding

- **Peacebuilding has a long history** in Northern Ireland, although it has taken many forms over the years; this paper will not tackle it extensively, beyond a few brief points for context.⁵
- The term "**peacebuilding**" is more closely associated with the latter part of the conflict and the peace process. Prior to that, particularly before the ceasefires, terms such as "community development" were preferred, as they seemed less politically charged amid the conflict.
- **During the conflict, peacebuilding was neither preferred nor appropriate**; mediation, creating safety, and conflict de-escalation were necessary. This type of work also continued after the Agreement, as conflicts erupted sporadically.⁶
- However, this does not mean that no peace-related work was undertaken during the conflict. **Work aimed at bringing people together**—such as interfaith initiatives, cross-community youth projects, and efforts by groups such as the Peace People—was undertaken. All this can be considered peacebuilding.
- This type of **people-to-people, or community relations-based work**, was, however, more **typical post-Agreement**. It has been argued that this type of work, often typified by the cross-community contact schemes influenced theoretically by the contact hypothesis, has become the mainstay of peacebuilding work in Northern Ireland.⁷
- Emily Stanton provides a useful breakdown of the phases of conflict and the types of peacebuilding work undertaken over the years (see *Appendix A*).

Contemporary Peacebuilding

- **Contemporary peacebuilding in Northern Ireland developed after the ceasefire.** However, it was punctuated by mediation, conflict resolution, and the management of ongoing situations, such as parade standoffs and back-channel negotiations following the collapse of ceasefires between 1994 and the Agreement in 1998.
- The **growth of peacebuilding work in Northern Ireland coincided with global shifts** in this area, especially the Agenda for Peace report by former UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali, presented in January 1992, which marked a new era in global peacebuilding.

⁵ See Stanton, E. E. (2021). *Theorising civil society peacebuilding: The practical wisdom of local peace practitioners in Northern Ireland, 1965–2015*. Routledge, for an excellent history of local peacebuilding.

⁶ See Stanton, E. E. (2021). *Theorising civil society peacebuilding: The practical wisdom of local peace practitioners in Northern Ireland, 1965–2015*. Routledge.

⁷ This social psychology theory, identified with Allport and others like Pettigrew, identifies optimal conditions for reducing prejudice through intergroup contact, such as equal status and shared goals. It emphasises that building relationships and fostering intergroup harmony via sustained personal interactions among different racial or ethnic groups is crucial. See Allport, G. W. (1954). *The nature of prejudice*. Addison-Wesley; and also, Pettigrew, T. F., & Tropp, L. R. (2006). A meta-analytic test of intergroup contact theory. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 90(5), 751–783.

- The importance of supporting peace was recognised with the establishment of PEACE I funding via the EU, which aimed to foster peace and reconciliation in Northern Ireland and the border counties of Ireland.
- **PEACE I focused not only on community relations but also on economic development**, echoing the idea that a **European Recovery Plan or Marshall Plan** was needed to ensure peace in Northern Ireland.⁸
- However, some critics deemed this approach premature, arguing that it focused on economic development as if peace would follow naturally. As such, **the programme was criticised for lacking clear guidance on how its activities were meant to promote peace and reconciliation specifically.**⁹
- The **PEACE II programme**, which ran from 2000 to 2006, addressed the shortcomings of its predecessor by **placing greater emphasis on relationships and cross-community work**, particularly reconciliation, building on the definitions provided by Hamber and Kelly.¹⁰
- The **PEACE III Programme**, which operated from 2007 to 2013, adopted a **more focused approach to reconciliation** outcomes while addressing sectarianism and, to a lesser extent, racism. It concentrated on two key themes: ***Reconciling Communities and Contributing to a Shared Society.***¹¹
- The **Peace IV Programme**¹² identified four key priority areas, or specific objectives, aimed at achieving significant and lasting change: **Shared Education; Children and Young People; Shared Spaces & Services; and Building Positive Relations.**
- This is important because, while PEACE IV built on previous programmes, it began to focus less on directed intercommunity interventions and sectarianism, and more on managing divisions as they are, **effectively accepting social and political segregation**, while aiming to build or merely maintain positive relationships around them.
- **Terms such as "positive relationships" and "shared spaces" reflect this shift** toward what one might call a **limited coexistence model of peacebuilding** (see *Appendix B* for the amounts of funding from the PEACE programmes).
- The latest Peace programme (**PEACE Plus**) is **designed to support peace and prosperity** across Northern Ireland and the border counties. In other words, issues of prosperity and the economy have resurfaced, reminiscent of those in 1995. The programme has sought to fund larger agencies, government bodies, and even universities, **essentially suggesting a trickle-down approach to peace** rather than building it from the bottom up.
- To a degree, this approach is **mirrored in the current Programme for Government (PfG)** too, with its core mission of "People, Planet, and Prosperity, as well as a cross-cutting commitment to Peace". Although peace is invoked as an idea, it is never defined, yet linked to "a prosperous Northern Ireland for everyone". **But it is unclear in the PfG whether the underlying idea is that peace flows from prosperity or that prosperity requires peace.**

⁸ <https://peaceplatform.seupb.eu/en/story-of-peace/introduction/evolution-of-peace-programmes/>

⁹ <https://peaceplatform.seupb.eu/en/story-of-peace/key-themes/reconciliation/>

¹⁰ Hamber, B., & Kelly, G. (2005). A Place for Reconciliation? Conflict and Locality in Northern Ireland (Report No. 18). Belfast, Northern Ireland: Democratic Dialogue, see <http://www.brandonhamber.com/publications/report-dd17.pdf>

¹¹ Examples of projects include: the development of local council peace and reconciliation action plans to combat sectarianism and racism; the use of the creative arts to address sectarianism and racism; partnerships aimed at reducing sectarianism and racism by promoting leadership and fostering social integration with ethnic minorities; collection of stories about the conflict to promote reconciliation and understanding, and capacity building for women to contribute to post-conflict transition and inter-community dialogue. Taken from https://peaceplatform.seupb.eu/en/story-of-peace/key-themes/reconciliation/#_ftn1

¹² <https://www.executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk/articles/peace-iv-programme>

- In this context, it is fair to say that the **underlying model for peacebuilding in the PfG, and arguably at a government level, is ill-conceived, fragmented, and conceptually deficient**, which will negatively affect any policy addressing such issues.
- Put another way, although there was substantial investment in the **bottom-up, intervention-driven approach to peacebuilding, it has been increasingly diminished in both real and conceptual terms over the last 10 years.**
- There has been a general **decline in funding for community-based peacebuilding.**¹³
- **A relatively thin model of peace (coexistence, largely accepting division, with pockets of integration) has now taken root.** This is driven mainly by a little-understood focus on economic development, in which **underlying divisions have been normalised.**
- We are back to a stage where investment, technology development, and **job creation alone are assumed to address underlying fissures in community relations.**
- **“Growth” as a concept is built into this idea, accepted uncritically,** and seen as positive. How growth, for example, can exacerbate inequality, contribute to environmental destruction, increase competition, and create further tension is seldom mentioned.

Current Context

- The Peace Summit Partnership has identified **a range of issues that still need to be addressed** over 25 years since the Agreement, including the need to:¹⁴
 - Ensure positive, constructive leadership
 - Formulate an inclusive peace plan
 - Adapt the Agreement for the current context
 - Tackle paramilitarism
 - Good relations-proofing and address segregation
 - Integrate education
 - Enhance youth participation
 - Create a vehicle for civic engagement
 - Invest in peacebuilding
 - Enhance societal well-being
 - Undertake civic education on the past and future
- **New areas for consideration have emerged since the Agreement**, including a growth in tourism and heritage work (often with differing narratives), and approaches to remembering the past, as well as LGBTQI+ activism, mental health challenges and rapid technological changes in AI and social media, as well as international issues resonating locally (e.g., Black Lives Matter, genocide in Gaza).
- Furthermore, other issues continue to emerge, **including climate change, Brexit-related instability, the Constitutional status of Northern Ireland, the rise of right-wing extremism, the cost-of-living crisis, corruption in political office, misinformation, the**

¹³ UK government pulls funding for Irish peace and reconciliation project <https://www.irishtimes.com/politics/2025/07/30/uk-government-pulls-funding-for-irish-peace-and-reconciliation-project/>; and Severe cuts to peacebuilding projects across NI risk undoing years of progress, fear MLAs, see <https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/politics/severe-cuts-to-peace-building-projects-across-ni-risk-undoing-years-of-progress-fear-mlas/a/120834395.html>.

¹⁴ Hamber, B., Erwin, D., & McArdle, E. (2023). *Peace Summit 2023: The Unfinished Business of Peace and Reconciliation. A Call to Action*. Belfast: John and Pat Hume Foundation, Community Dialogue & Ulster University with partners YouthAction NI, Holywell Trust, Integrated Education Fund, and the Glencree Centre for Peace & Reconciliation. <https://humefoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Peace-Summit-A-Call-to-Action-24-May-2023.pdf>. See <https://humefoundation.org/peace-summit>

unchecked power of international companies, and migration-related challenges, with the latter resulting in serious racism, polarisation, and violence.

- In Northern Ireland, **young people have identified several pressing concerns they feel are relevant**, including climate change, mental health, education, human rights, and issues related to gender and LGBTQI+ rights, as well as racism in society.¹⁵
- Young people express a strong sentiment that the current political system is **failing to address these critical issues and remains preoccupied with the politics of the past**. Notably, fewer young people cite Brexit and the Troubles as primary concerns, indicating a shift toward more immediate and relevant challenges.¹⁶
- The Peace Summit found that young people, although optimistic about what has changed in Northern Ireland and some prospects for a better future, also **feel held back by ongoing sectarian politics**, while having no voice in what they see as a dysfunctional political system that does not address the issues they see as important.¹⁷
- Globally, the Trump administration has been undermining a local, bottom-up approach to sustaining peace, advocating a **‘peace through strength’ and a transactional approach to peace**.
- On one level, Northern Ireland is no different from many countries facing challenges on a wide range of issues. At the same time, Northern Ireland is facing these issues **in a context of the acceptance and normalisation of community division and the segregation** of culture, housing and education, and with a **history of extensive political violence**, which has also been extending to new communities and not only old divisions.
- There is little serious analysis of how **the conflict's legacy endures and how tensions arising from ongoing societal challenges tend to build on past fault lines, which serve as a prism for fuelling new and historical tensions** (e.g., Brexit, the border, migration riots, and economic development). This was most acute during the riots fuelled by racism in 2025 and 2026, primarily occurring in areas that were severely affected by the conflict, where the underlying influence of paramilitarism was present.
- **At a governmental level in Northern Ireland, basic infrastructure projects often become proxy battles for political division**. These emerge as parochial discussions over which community will “really” benefit from development, whether the development concerns roads, bridges, or stadiums.
- **The inability to transcend political divisions leads to absurd inefficiencies**: duplicate community centres built in close proximity to serve 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.
- In other words, the notion that **peace comes through prosperity, while normalising divisions, not only creates tensions but can also be economically counterproductive**.

¹⁵ Northern Ireland Youth Forum. (2023). Young people of the peace process. See <https://niyf.org/northern-ireland-youth-forum/youngpeople-of-the-peace-process/> Accessed 16/05/2025.

¹⁶ Hamber, B. & McArdle, E. (2026). Peacebuilding, politicisation, and youth work: Pathways to youth critical action for sustainable peace in Northern Ireland. *Journal of Social Issues*, 82, e70073, June. <https://spssi.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/josi.70073>

¹⁷ Also see Hamber, B., & McArdle, E. (2024). Response to draft programme for government 2024: Contemporary peacebuilding issues for young people in Northern Ireland. Ulster University. See <https://pure.ulster.ac.uk/en/publications/response-to-draft-programme-for-government-2024-contemporary-peac/>

Discussion: New Trajectories for Peace

1. The Peace Summit found, after a large-scale consultation, “...there is both hope and disillusionment 25 years on since the Good Friday Agreement. The positive energy of the past needs to be rekindled, and new thinking developed, so hope does not completely fade. The status quo should not be an option; rather, **the quest for a shared, integrated, multicultural and dynamic society is a priority**”.¹⁸
2. To achieve this, four trajectories to sustain peace are needed, including a focus on the:
 - 1) **top-down**: functional political system and effective leadership, working for all;
 - 2) **bottom-up**: community-level work on the ground dealing with communities, divisions and peacebuilding concerns, as well as new issues arising;
 - 3) **backwards-looking**: legacy interventions focusing on unaddressed harm of political violence and consequences of conflict, e.g. underinvestment in certain areas;
 - 4) **forward-looking**: building the economy, breaking down social and economic segregation; creating jobs, innovating, enhancing social and environmental well-being, narrowing inequality, and addressing new challenges arising from technological change, climate, migration, gender-relations and the global polarisation of politics, among many others.
3. Arguably, **the current focus at a political level appears to be primarily on only one aspect of the forward-looking dimensions** (typified by the ill-conceived idea of peace through prosperity), while accepting societal and community division as the norm.
4. There is an assumption in the current political approach that economic development and growth, coupled with nominal “sharing” initiatives and a limited approach to legacy matters, will mend or at least dampen divisions—but **little evidence supports this**.
5. **A more considered model than “peace by prosperity” is clearly necessary**. Such a model needs to link economic development to relationship-building, reconciliation and community well-being in a much more considered way. Its overall focus needs to be a more informed, transformative and sustainable approach to peace that moves beyond the assumption that economic growth can address all socio-political woes.
6. Settling for division and limited social sharing may feel comfortable in the short term, but in the long run, it will **continue to erode the Agreement's achievements**.
7. This also raises questions about the extent to which society is equipped to address emerging issues (e.g., further economic decline or a border poll) without **seriously exacerbating historical divisions** if social and political divisions remain unaddressed.
8. **There is a risk that, despite significant investment and many local successes**, including from the PEACE Programme itself, as well as those of other funders that have tended to adopt a more grassroots model of peacebuilding, **successes will not be sustained**. Continued investment in community-level work is therefore necessary.
9. In short, **to sustain peace, substantive investment in all 4 of the trajectories** is needed.
10. In addition, faced with the myriad of challenges identified above, questions must be asked about **whether past methodologies are still appropriate**. Although there are many lessons from past approaches, it is **unclear whether they are appropriate for new challenges** or whether new approaches to peacebuilding are needed.

¹⁸ Hamber, B., Erwin, D., & McArdle, E. (2023). *Peace summit 2023: The unfinished business of peace and reconciliation. A call to action*. John and Pat Hume Foundation, Community Dialogue & Ulster University, with partners YouthAction NI, Holywell Trust, Integrated Education Fund, and the Glencree Centre for Peace & Reconciliation.

11. Although a return to the extensive funding of the PEACE II and III era at the community level is unlikely, a new network of **stakeholders with diverse skills, legacies, and needs is emerging**, and issues deemed important at both local and international levels are shifting rapidly. This creates new opportunities.
12. Although there is much to learn from the rich history of peacebuilding in Northern Ireland and its methods, it is important to ask whether **peacebuilding efforts should or can proceed as they did in the past, and how new skills that have flowed into society** in recent years can be utilised.
13. A further question is whether **there is still reliance on a two-community dialogue and sharing approach that is no longer fit for purpose given current challenges**. Arguably, the impact of **inter-community dialogue has reached a plateau** and new approaches need to be explored.¹⁹
14. When it comes to working with young people, it has recently been argued that **a shift in peacebuilding efforts from primarily dialogue-based approaches to fostering transferable, politically informed capacities and consciousness** among young people for action is a vital next step in Northern Ireland. This is important because political pressure and youth activism can challenge current leaders to do more to address social and political segregation, often the root of anxiety for young people and the cause of ongoing social and political tension.²⁰
15. Peacebuilding in Northern Ireland must **move beyond a binary community focus and embrace emerging societal themes and issues** that were less prominent two decades ago. Genuinely engaging young people in this process is critical, as is fresh thinking.
16. To this end, we urgently need a **more critical reflection on what we mean by sustainable peace**. As noted above, this model needs to embrace the 4 trajectories, while also recognising that a more transformative approach to peace is needed.
17. **A transformative approach to sustainable peace requires an integration of the process of addressing societal-level issues** such as inequality, social exclusion, retraction in the job market, marginalisation, well-being and the cost-of-living crisis, **with community-level interventions** that address questions of societal division, ongoing paramilitarism, differing political positions, legacy and identity-based tensions, as well as relationship building between multiple groups. This relies on capable political leadership.
18. A transformative approach to sustainable peace relies on new energy and inclusion for all, and **political leadership that is no longer rewarded for normalising social division**, while promoting economic development as the panacea for problems they themselves often exacerbate through rhetoric and by playing on old and new political divisions.
19. Building such a process requires **reflection on new models and approaches to peace**, as well as a revived civil society led by younger voices advocating for different and transformed politics that addresses the past while building the future.
20. The focus should be on **fostering transferable, politically informed capacities and consciousness aimed at social transformation** that are future-ready, not narrow conceptualisations of peace that rely on a limited repertoire of methods.

¹⁹ Hamber, B. & McArdle, E. (2026). Peacebuilding, politicisation, and youth work: Pathways to youth critical action for sustainable peace in Northern Ireland. *Journal of Social Issues*, 82, e70073, June. See <https://spssi.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/josi.70073>

²⁰ Hamber, B. & McArdle, E. (2026).

Appendix A – Phases of Peacebuilding

Summary of phases of peacebuilding by Dr Emily Stanton.

See Stanton, E. E. (2021). *Theorising civil society peacebuilding: The practical wisdom of local peace practitioners in Northern Ireland, 1965–2015*. Routledge.

Table 1: Grassroots and civil society peacebuilding timeframe 1965-2015

Years	Stage of Conflict	Phase of Peacebuilding	Types of Activity/Examples
1965-1968	Latent	Phase One: Increasing the volume on the conflict radio	Advocacy for civil rights, non-violent demonstrations and civil disobedience Promoting reconciliation
1969-1972	Early Eruption of Manifest Conflict	Phase Two: Crisis response and fire fighting	De-escalating conflict Maintaining cohesion Anti-intimidation in the workplace Protesting direct violence
1973-1979	Conflict Escalation	Phase Three: Holding societal threads together	Political intermediaries Community development Rallying the public for non-violence
1980-1991	Conflict Normalisation Anglo-Irish Agreement (1985)	Phase Four: Getting on with It	Human rights advocacy Supporting prisoners First integrated school, peace education Shared inter-faith communities Mediation introduced Supporting victims
1992-1998	Ceasefire, Negotiations and Agreement Ceasefires (1994-1995) GFA (1998)	Phase Five: Tilling the soil for political agreement	Back-channel private dialogue Public inquiry and dialogue De-militarisation GRIT model Interface-focused engagement 'YES' campaign for Good Friday Agreement referendum
1999-2015	Post-Agreement Power-sharing	Phase Six: Two steps forward one step back	Police reform training and support Restorative justice practice introduced Dialogue and storytelling projects

Appendix B – Peace Programme Funding

PEACE Programme Funding Allocation:

Theme	PEACE I	PEACE II	PEACE II Ext.	PEACE III	PEACE IV	Total
Period	1995 – 1999	2000 – 2004	2004 – 2006	2007 – 2013	2014 – 2020	25 years
EC Contribution	€500m	€531m	€78m	€225m	€229	€1,563m
National Contribution	€167m	€304m	€82m	€108m	€41	€702m
Projects	15,016	7,103		226	96	22,441
Total Value	€667m	€835m	€160m	€333m	€270	€2,265m

Source: <https://peaceplatform.seupb.eu/en/story-of-peace/introduction/evolution-of-peace-programmes/>