



## International Organisations and Peace Inclusivity in Northern Ireland

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## Introduction: Towards an Inclusive Peace in Northern Ireland

Northern Ireland's peace process has often been lauded as a model of inclusive peacebuilding. A key feature of this process is the inclusion of previously marginalised voices and issues in the peace agreement. Notably, women's groups secured the participation of a dedicated women's caucus (the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition) at the multi-party talks. The Agreement's implementation further saw women and civil society leaders actively involved, from campaigning for the Agreement's ratification by referendum to serving on post-agreement commissions (Bramble, 2018). Moreover, the process contains provisions for equal opportunity, broad political participation, social inclusion, reconciliation, attention to victims' needs, integrated education, and the creation of a Civic Forum for broad civic input (Bramble, 2018). These provisions underscore a commitment that peace is not merely an elite pact but addresses the needs of diverse groups in society.

International actors arguably played an important role in achieving this inclusive peace. This policy brief examines how international organisations and donors have supported inclusive peace in Northern Ireland. The brief draws on both academic analyses and policy lessons, including insights from a peace inclusivity workshop, to inform recommendations for sustaining an inclusive peace in Northern Ireland and other post-conflict settings.

## International Organisations

As former British Prime Minister John Major reflected, the Northern Ireland settlement “has many parents”, and included the involvement of the United States and European Union, alongside local leaders and communities (Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, 2023). The United States provided high-level facilitation—Senator George Mitchell chaired the talks—and economic support, while the EU, as a stakeholder in both the UK and Ireland's prosperity, became a major funder of peacebuilding initiatives (Collins, 2023). This partnership of local and international efforts helped ensure that the Agreement enjoyed broad buy-in.

Since the earliest stages of the peace process, international organisations and donor governments have been central to funding architectures in Northern Ireland, though mostly as enablers of local initiatives rather than primary designers of political outcomes. Designated peacebuilding funds such as the International Fund for Ireland and the EU PEACE programmes were explicitly framed as supports for civil society organisations and cross-community engagement, reflecting a broader recognition in the literature that civil society organisations are key intermediaries in conflict transformation (Cochrane & Dunn, 2002; Edwards, 2009; Reimer & Schmitz, 2021). Rather than imposing a blueprint, these instruments sought to create material conditions and institutional spaces in which local actors could experiment with new forms of cooperation (Buchanan, 2014).

The Northern Ireland case also confirms a more general claim about the political economy of international aid: poorly designed and fragmented interventions risk reproducing division, whereas coordinated, long-term support promises to be more successful. Studies of EU PEACE programmes and the International Fund for Ireland show that inflexible, short-term, contract-based funding, with heavy reporting requirements, can generate perverse incentives, absorb staff time, and even entrench sectarian competition over resources (Harvey, 1997; Phillips & Levasseur, 2004; Mac Ginty, 2011; Richmond, 2014). At the same time, when funding is explicitly oriented toward cross-community contact, it provides a degree of stability and is sensitive to local priorities; it can foster bridging relationships and support a more inclusive peace (Hancock, 2017).

The International Fund for Ireland is a useful illustration of how international donors attempted to address fragmentation and competition. Created in 1986 after the Anglo-Irish Agreement, and financed by multiple states alongside the EU, the Fund offered a joint vehicle for supporting reconciliation and economic development projects across Northern Ireland and the Border Counties (Khan & Byrne, 2016). Rather than a series of overlapping bilateral programmes, the International Fund for Ireland pooled resources and channelled them through a single institution with a mandate to promote cross-community contact, local economic development, and job creation (Skarlato et al., 2016). Research suggests that this structure enhanced coordination, allowed for strategic targeting of deprived and contested areas, and supported thousands of projects over several decades (Khan & Byrne, 2016). At the same time, some studies suggest that these successes are incomplete in the sense that there are ongoing tensions around conditionality, gatekeeping, and the risk that funding criteria can still marginalise some groups or priorities (Davies, 2025).

The EU PEACE programmes similarly combined large scale with an explicit cross-community and cross-border rationale. From PEACE I onwards, the EU framed support in terms of social and economic cohesion, cross-community reconciliation, and the need to address structural inequalities that underpin the conflict (Skarlato et al., 2013). Over time, successive phases shifted emphasis, from early support for basic community development and confidence-building, through economic regeneration and reconciliation, to more targeted work on youth, legacy issues, and integration (Buchanan, 2014; Skarlato et al., 2016). Qualitative research with civil society organisation leaders and officials indicates that this long-term, multi-phase architecture helped keep grassroots peacebuilding going during periods of political deadlock and made peace dividends visible in everyday life (Fehrling, 2024). Yet the same studies also document how identity-based eligibility criteria, bureaucratic application procedures, and rigid accountability requirements at times reinforced sectarian boundaries, favoured more "professionalised" organisations, and limited flexibility to respond quickly to local crises (Harvey, 1997; Creary & Byrne, 2014).

Taken together, this literature suggests that what distinguishes international engagement in Northern Ireland is not the sheer volume of aid, but the way in which this aid was delivered. This is a crucial observation. Funders institutionalised coordination, sustained support over decades, and linked funding explicitly to cross-community engagement and local needs (Levasseur & Frankel, 2017).

By institutionalising coordination through mechanisms like the International Fund for Ireland and the EU PEACE framework, the funders of the peace process avoided the pitfalls of scattered efforts. By focusing on long-term engagement beyond short funding cycles, they were able to build trust and social capital over the years. And by aligning their goals with inclusive local priorities, supporting grassroots' reconciliation, economic opportunity, and equal access, they reinforced the notion that peace dividends must be shared by all.

Recent scholarship supports this interpretation. Khan and Byrne (2016) show that coordinated donor frameworks enhanced sustainability; Rice (2021) emphasises that enduring peace depended on long-term engagement and local ownership; Laganà (2023) traces how early alignment between international and local actors laid the groundwork for peace; and Gilligan (2003) highlights that continued international involvement helped sustain progress during political stagnation.

The experience in Northern Ireland shows that well-coordinated international support can potentially serve as a powerful catalyst for inclusive peace, especially when it collaborates with local communities and governments in a complementary partnership. However, this approach has limitations, including the reliance on standardised international models of peacebuilding and the challenge of ensuring the inclusion of all social sectors affected by conflict, particularly historically marginalised groups such as diverse gender identities, ethnic communities, and the integration of growing migrant minorities (Jarman, 2016).

## Fostering Inclusion from the Ground Up: Youth, Education and Civic Engagement

A truly inclusive peace requires more than signed accords and high-level reforms; it must engage those who were historically alienated or marginalised. In Northern Ireland, a range of initiatives, many supported by international organisations, have focused on youth, education, and civic engagement as means to bridge divides and to promote inclusivity. These efforts recognise that sectarian conflict left deep mistrust between communities, and that building durable peace depends on creating opportunities for positive interaction, mutual understanding, and shared civic participation among ordinary people, especially the younger generation (Byrne, Levasseur & Reimer, 2023). In what follows, we explain each of these in turn, starting with youth.

*Youth engagement* has been a cornerstone of peacebuilding programming. During the Troubles, generations of young people grew up separated by physical “peace walls” and psychological barriers; schools, sports clubs, and neighbourhoods were largely split along Catholic/Nationalist and Protestant/Unionist lines (Cunningham & Gregory, 2014). Alarming, even after the Agreement, about 93% of Northern Ireland’s youth still attend segregated schools (Hayes, 2007; Gallagher, 2016). This segregation perpetuates parallel lives and allows old prejudices to persist. To counter this, numerous cross-community youth programmes have been established aiming to break down stereotypes and foster friendships across the divide. For example, PeacePlayers Northern Ireland uses sport to bring Catholic and Protestant youth together, engaging about 2,000 young people each year in multi-year basketball teams and leadership training that challenge sectarian attitudes (PeacePlayers Northern Ireland, 2018). Through practices, games and workshops, children and teens from different backgrounds learn to cooperate toward common goals and form bonds that transcend old enmities. Evaluations indicate clear attitudinal shifts; youth are more likely to see peers from the “other” community as friends and teammates, attributing change to the cross-community contact experience (PeacePlayers Northern Ireland, 2013). The vision behind such initiatives is “inspired and confident children and young people building positive relationships and promoting sustainable peace” (PeacePlayers Northern Ireland, n.d.). By investing in the post-conflict generation, peacebuilders aim to ensure that the legacy of violence is not passed down and that youth become agents of reconciliation.

*Education reform* is closely tied to youth engagement. Integrated education, bringing together Catholic and Protestant students in the same schools, has been a longstanding policy ambition in Northern Ireland. Most recently, the Integrated Education Act of 2022 was passed, requiring the Department of Education and the Education Authority of Northern Ireland to support integrated education (Gray, McNulty & Keenan, 2009). Progress has been slow, but international funding has bolstered efforts in this area. Under the EU's PEACE IV programme, for instance, dedicated support was given to initiatives around Shared Education and Integrated Education (Thompson, 2015). Shared Education involves partner programmes where separate schools (one largely Catholic, and one largely Protestant) conduct joint classes or activities, allowing students to mingle without immediately restructuring the school system. Evaluations of these programmes indicate improved inter-group relations and empathy among students who would otherwise seldom meet peers from the other community (Kelly, 2024). The importance of such educational efforts cannot be overstated: segregated schooling reinforces division, whereas learning together in safe environments can dispel prejudices and lay the groundwork for a more integrated society (Byrne, Levasseur & Reimer, 2023). International organisations like UNESCO and UNICEF have likewise advocated for peace education and supported teacher training in conflict-resolution skills in Northern Ireland, aligning with the global agenda of education for peace. While challenges remain, including parental choice and the limited capacity of integrated schools, the ongoing focus on education in peacebuilding strategy reflects an understanding that inclusive peace must begin in the classroom.

*Civic engagement and civil society* have also been pivotal in making peace inclusive. The Belfast/Good Friday Agreement itself envisioned a role for civil society through the Civic Forum, a consultative body of community representatives meant to advise on social and economic issues (O'Connell, Ni Aoláin & Malagón, 2024). Although the Civic Forum met only briefly (2000–2002) before being suspended, the concept underscored the principle that peace implementation should not be left to politicians alone; ordinary citizens and organised groups should have a voice (Mac Ginty, 2014). In practice, civil society organisations have stepped up in multiple ways. Community organisations have led dialogues at local levels, bringing victims, former combatants and neighbours together to address issues such as flags, parades or memorials that political leaders often found too sensitive. Youth clubs, women's groups, churches and NGOs have all acted as intermediaries facilitating grassroots reconciliation. International organisations have frequently provided funding, training or platforms for these efforts (RIFF Workshop, 2025).

One successful area of civic engagement has been joint community-development projects. With external financial assistance, Nationalist and Unionist communities have collaborated on improving shared public spaces, building community-centres serving both groups, and tackling socioeconomic problems (Rafferty, 2012). The EU PEACE programmes explicitly prioritised “projects reaching hard-to-reach groups” and fostering partnerships between communities on issues of mutual concern (Mirimanova, 2010). Such projects provided tangible evidence that working together could yield dividends for everyone, such as cross-community business parks creating jobs in deprived border areas or environmental schemes cleaning interface zones scarred by violence. These confidence-building measures at the civic level helped maintain public support for peace, even during periods when political agreements faltered (Byrne, Levasseur & Reimer, 2023). Notably, during the suspensions of the Northern Ireland Assembly in the 2000s and late 2010s, civil-society initiatives (often backed by continued international funding) kept lines of communication open across the divide and maintained momentum on reconciliation locally. This “bottom-up” resilience is a hallmark of an inclusive peace process; it does not rely solely on top-down directives but empowers society to carry peace forward (Mac Ginty & Firchow, 2016).

The importance of *grassroots inclusion* is also highlighted by other post-conflict countries. In other peace processes such as the Balkans, the absence of strong civic and youth engagement has often resulted in peace agreements that failed to take root among the population (McMahon, 2017). Northern Ireland’s relatively robust civil society and its early start on cross-community confidence-building distinguish it as a case in which social inclusion was taken seriously. The work of the Patten Commission on policing reform is instructive: through an expert commission, it conducted one of the widest public consultations in Northern Ireland’s history and engaged ordinary citizens in developing a policing model that both communities would accept (Hays, 2013). This example shows that inclusive outcomes often require deliberate outreach to citizens in implementation, not just negotiation.

Despite these positive developments, challenges remain in ensuring that all parts of society are engaged in peace. Youth in economically disadvantaged areas who feel alienated from the political process, or those with lingering trauma and mental-health issues, remain susceptible to sectarian narratives or paramilitary influence (Kelly, 2024). Evidence of continued sectarian attitudes and episodic violence (such as riots involving youth) reminds us that each new generation must be given reasons to invest in peace. The sustained efforts of NGOs and international partners to support youth leadership, intercultural dialogue and trauma healing are thus as relevant today as they were in 1998. Additionally, issues of race and new diversity have emerged: Northern Ireland has seen increased immigration, and ensuring that newer minority communities (e.g., migrants, people of colour) are also included in the vision of peace is a developing frontier for inclusive peacebuilding. The civic sphere must broaden to include these voices too, so that peace is truly for everyone in a changing society (RIFF Workshop, 2025).

Overall, the pursuit of an inclusive peace in Northern Ireland has been significantly bolstered by initiatives targeting young people, reforming education, and empowering civil society. These efforts, often supported by international organisations in concert with local actors, have helped change attitudes and build relationships at the community level to foster reconciliation. The overarching lesson is that peace is built in classrooms, youth clubs, sports fields and community halls as much as in parliaments. By embedding the values of reconciliation and mutual respect in everyday life, Northern Ireland has been able to slowly transform a culture of conflict into a culture of coexistence. Continued vigilance and innovation in these grassroots domains will be needed to fully overcome the legacy of division (Murphy, McDowell, Braniff & Denyer, 2018) and the current polarising divisions around migration and paramilitary violence.

## Coordination and Ongoing Peace Challenges

While Northern Ireland's peace process is widely considered a success, it remains a work in progress. One critical factor in surmounting past challenges and addressing current ones is the continued coordination and coherence of international and domestic efforts. Earlier in the peacebuilding trajectory, coherent strategies among international donors were vital (De Coning, 2012). Looking ahead, maintaining that coherence amid evolving political and financial conditions is an ongoing challenge that policymakers must navigate.

A pressing issue is donor fatigue and shifting priorities (Besel, 2013). Over two decades after the Good Friday Agreement, international attention and resources can diminish as other global crises emerge. For instance, recent reductions in external funding have raised concerns about impacts on community projects (Morrow, 2017). The UK's withdrawal from the European Union introduced uncertainty, as Northern Ireland stood to lose direct EU structural funds. The launch of the EU's PEACE PLUS programme (2021–2027) with co-funding from the EU and UK Treasury signals efforts to maintain stability (Congress Research Service, 2025). Nonetheless, the episode underscores the fragility of funding streams and the importance of sustained political commitment from all partners. As one peacebuilder noted, the consistent presence of international actors like the EU and US made the process more resilient, especially “when it really mattered” during political crises (RIFF Workshop, 2025). Without this continuity, local actors may struggle to address deep-rooted issues such as mental health provision, economic inequality and reconciliation initiatives, particularly during budget austerity or institutional deadlock.

Another ongoing challenge lies in ensuring coherence between peacebuilding initiatives and broader policy frameworks. Peacebuilding in Northern Ireland intersects with economic policy, justice and policing, education reform and community development. International assistance must align with and reinforce local policy goals, rather than work at cross-purposes. For example, over time the EU PEACE programmes were channelled to complement regional development plans and community relations strategies (Skarlato, Byrne & Thiessen, 2010). UK and Irish governments have likewise coordinated via the British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference to ensure their bilateral initiatives advance shared reconciliation objectives rather than diverge. The principle of additionality has been crucial: international funds were meant to supplement local investment in peace, not replace it (Collier & Gunning, 1995). When local political will has lagged (for example, delays in implementing legacy mechanisms for dealing with the past), international actors have sometimes nudged or incentivised action while still recognising that local ownership and civilian agency are essential for legitimacy (Amaya-Panche, 2025; Olsson & Jarstad, 2011).

Maintaining this balance—supportive but not intrusive—requires ongoing dialogue and partnership. An example of this is the EU's PEACE PLUS programmes. These initiatives have transitioned from immediate post-conflict recovery to long-term sustainable partnership through ongoing dialogue with local stakeholders (Special EU Programmes Body, 2024).

Coordination among international actors themselves continues to require attention. While the International Fund for Ireland and EU PEACE frameworks provided central hubs, a growing number of actors now operate on the ground: the EU, national governments (US, UK, Ireland), international NGOs, private foundations (e.g., Atlantic Philanthropies) and multilateral agencies. A structured donor-coordination mechanism remains beneficial, especially as new challenges like the fallout from Brexit, the COVID-19 pandemic and global economic shifts affect Northern Ireland (Morrow, 2017). For instance, economic strain can stir old grievances, so aligning economic support from bodies like the International Fund for Ireland and the EU with peacebuilding objectives is prudent. Policymakers might consider convening periodic "peacebuilding roundtables" with major donors and local officials to share information, avoid duplication and align strategy. A constant theme in these challenges is the need to adapt and innovate while staying true to the core principles of inclusive peace. Northern Ireland's journey shows that peacebuilding is not a one-off project but an ongoing process requiring renewal and responsiveness (Community Relations Council, 2023). Moreover, the rise of social media and online echo chambers means new forms of community outreach and digital peacebuilding are necessary to counter sectarian narratives among youth. International partners can assist by introducing global best practices in digital engagement and providing platforms for positive storytelling about Northern Ireland's progress (Community Relations Council, 2023).

Peace inclusivity also functions as a safeguard against backsliding. When all groups feel they have a stake, spoilers have less room to manoeuvre. Renewing efforts to include under-represented voices, be they young people, women (still under-represented in political leadership), ethnic minorities, or the most socially deprived communities, is thus both morally and strategically wise. Recently, proposals such as establishing a Citizens' Assembly in Northern Ireland have aimed to give ordinary people a greater role in shaping the next phase of peace (Merrick, 2019).

The UK Parliament's Northern Ireland Affairs Committee has similarly recommended exploring structured civic engagement models to break political impasses and tap into community wisdom (Congress Research Service, 2025). Embracing such participatory approaches will be part of keeping the peace process dynamic and inclusive going forward.

To sum up, the coordination and coherence of international and domestic efforts continue to be essential in Northern Ireland's peace process. Sustained long-term engagement, alignment with local policy, and structured donor coordination form the core of what has worked, and what still needs attention. The path to inclusive, resilient peace is ongoing, not complete.

## Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

Northern Ireland's experience shows how international organisations, when acting in concert and in partnership with local actors, can enhance both the inclusivity and durability of peace. The combined impact of the International Fund for Ireland and the EU PEACE programmes shows that coordination and long-term commitment can transform conflict structures by enabling inclusive local participation (Byrne, Levasseur, & Reimer, 2023). These mechanisms not only supplied resources but also lent legitimacy and stability to the peace agenda. As a result, Northern Ireland could advance inclusive reforms, from integrated schooling to women's and youth empowerment, which remain cornerstones of its post-agreement transformation (Bramble, 2018; PeacePlayers Northern Ireland, 2013).

Yet the process also reflects the limitations identified in the wider peacebuilding literature, consistent with insights gains from workshop conversations conducted by the authors in Belfast in June 2025. Scholars have cautioned that liberal peace frameworks can unintentionally reproduce exclusion by privileging technocratic or elite actors over grassroots participation (Jumar, 2016; Mac Ginty, 2011; Donais, 2012; Richmond, 2011). Northern Ireland partially avoided these pitfalls through local ownership and the diversification of international networks, but persistent inequalities, sectarian segregation, and new patterns of migration demonstrate that inclusion is an evolving challenge. An inclusive peace, therefore, is not a static condition but a continuing political and social practice. Therefore, the following policy recommendations aim to inform decision makers in strengthening peace inclusivity supported by international actors in Northern Ireland:

1. **Sustain Long-Term and Coordinated International Commitment:** Peacebuilding is not cumulative and is easily reversible. Long-term support from the EU, US, and Ireland has been critical in sustaining the social fabric that underpins political stability (Byrne et al., 2009c; Morrow, 2017). Programmes such as PEACE PLUS (2021–2027) should be renewed beyond the current cycle, with explicit provisions for addressing intersectional exclusion, including gender, ethnicity, and migrant communities (Community Relations Council, 2023). Consistent multi-donor engagement reflects an articulated model of peacebuilding, one based on trust, predictability, and responsiveness rather than short-term project logic.

- 2. Deepen Donor Coordination and Strategic Alignment:** The International Fund for Ireland model illustrates how pooling resources enhances coherence, legitimacy, and local ownership (Olsson & Jarstad, 2011). Future funding frameworks should replicate this cooperative architecture across emerging themes such as mental-health recovery, intergenerational trauma, dealing with the past, and digital inclusion. Regular donor coordination forums involving the Northern Ireland Executive, civil-society leaders, and international partners could operationalise what Carlarne (1997) termed “collaborative peacebuilding”, aligning international strategy with community-driven priorities – in other words, a hybrid model of peacebuilding articulating bottom-up and top-down models (Mac Ginty, 2011).
- 3. Broaden Inclusion Beyond Traditional Divides:** The original peace process focused on bridging Catholic–Protestant divisions; today’s inclusion agenda must also encompass gender diversity, ethnic minorities, and migrant communities. As Richmond (2014) argues, sustainable peace depends on recognising new social diversity. Funding criteria for the International Fund for Ireland and PEACE PLUS should explicitly reward initiatives that incorporate inclusion, ensuring that peacebuilding adapts to Northern Ireland’s evolving demography.
- 4. Strengthen Grassroots and Youth Engagement:** Empowering the post-conflict generation remains central. Initiatives such as PeacePlayers Northern Ireland and Shared Education partnerships demonstrate that everyday cooperation reduces prejudice and fosters civic identity (Kelly, 2024; PeacePlayers Northern Ireland, 2018). Building on this evidence, international partners should prioritise community-based youth forums, inter-school projects, and sports diplomacy as preventative peacebuilding tools – investments that sustain social cohesion even during political deadlock (Byrne, Levasseur, & Reimer, 2023).
- 5. Institutionalise Inclusive Governance and Civic Participation:** Revitalising participatory structures like the Civic Forum or piloting Citizens’ Assemblies would institutionalise dialogue between government and civil society (Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, 2023). This echoes Donais’s (2012) call for “hybrid peace” frameworks, where domestic and international actors share decision-making authority. Inclusion at this level not only prevents elite capture but embeds deliberation as a routine practice of governance.

**6. Address Legacy and Socio-Economic Inequalities Collectively:** Unresolved legacy issues, victims' reparations, deprivation, and interface barriers continue to test reconciliation. As Mac Ginty (2008) notes, a "cold peace" risks taking hold if structural inequalities persist. Coordinated, cross-community economic and memorialisation projects, funded jointly by the International Fund for Ireland, the EU, and national governments, can transform grievances into cooperative ventures that sustain reconciliation (Community Relations Council, 2023).

In sum, Northern Ireland affirms that international support is most effective when coordinated, long-term, and rooted in local agency. The partnership between diverse international networks and empowered communities created a peace process that, while imperfect, remains one of the most resilient globally. Applying these lessons, particularly the link between diversity, coordination, and inclusivity identified in this document, can guide other conflict-affected societies seeking to transform division into coexistence.

However, building an inclusive peace is an ongoing project. Even 25 years on, Northern Ireland faces challenges, including persistent legacies of conflict linked to communal divisions, segregation, intergenerational trauma, victims' reparations, truth, and paramilitary violence linked to criminal activity (Amaya-Panche, 2025).

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## About Us

PeaceRep is a research consortium based at Edinburgh Law School. Our research is rethinking peace and transition processes in the light of changing conflict dynamics, changing demands of inclusion, and changes in patterns of global intervention in conflict and peace/mediation/transition management processes.

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