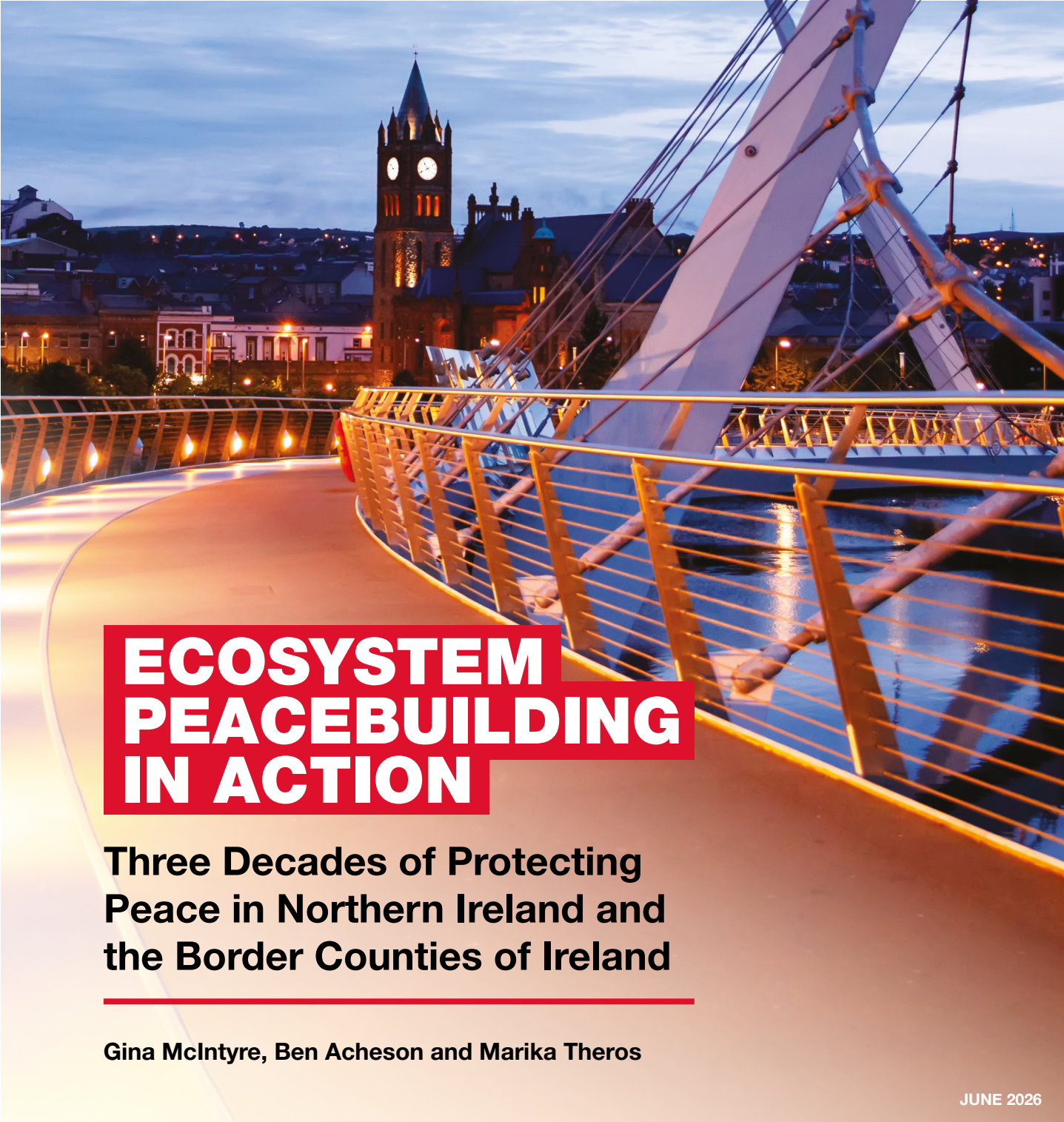




Special EU Programmes Body
Comhlacht na gClár Speisialta AE
Special EU Skemes Boadie



ECOSYSTEM PEACEBUILDING IN ACTION

**Three Decades of Protecting
Peace in Northern Ireland and
the Border Counties of Ireland**

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Gina McIntyre is the Chief Executive Officer of the Special EU Programmes Body. Gina is a qualified chartered accountant and has spent most of her career working in European support programmes, giving her deep, practical knowledge of the political, social and economic dimensions of cross-border development in a society emerging from conflict.

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ABOUT THE ORGANISATIONS

The **Civic Ecosystems & Social Innovation Programme** at LSE IDEAS, London School of Economics focuses on how civic ecosystems function in practice, both as a way of understanding complex social systems and as an approach to social innovation. Drawing on complexity science and ecosystem thinking, it examines how different actors, approaches, and forms of knowledge come together to address shared challenges. The work centres on three core features—diversity, interdependence, and civiness—which shape how ecosystems organise and generate public value. The programme explores these dynamics across areas including crisis and conflict, peace and justice, climate and sustainability, and civic engagement, while supporting collaboration and ongoing work with partners within and beyond LSE.

The **Civic Ecosystems Initiative** is a platform for ideas, research, and collaboration focused on how civic ecosystems drive social change. It brings together a community of researchers and practitioners to explore how diverse actors and approaches interact, adapt, and work in complementary ways across complex and shifting contexts. Through insights, publications, and convening, the Initiative aims to make these dynamics more visible and to strengthen the ecosystems shaping outcomes across areas such as peace, justice, civic space, and crisis response.

The **Special EU Programmes Body**, or SEUPB, is one of six cross-border implementation bodies established under the Belfast or Good Friday Agreement.

SEUPB holds the statutory remit for managing EU funding programmes across Northern Ireland and the six border counties of Ireland.

Since 1999, SEUPB has managed successive PEACE and INTERREG programmes, as well as supporting a range of transnational initiatives. Over the past three decades, these programmes have supported more than 23,000 projects and delivered investment of approximately €3.39 billion into communities affected by conflict and division. SEUPB is currently responsible for managing the €1.14 billion PEACEPLUS programme.

All of these programmes, since 1994, have been supported by a funding agreement involving the European Union, the Government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, the Government of Ireland, and the Northern Ireland Executive.

This sustained investment continues to protect and strengthen the hard-won peace, while supporting social cohesion, reconciliation and prosperity across Northern Ireland and the border region.

INTRODUCTION

Over three decades, successive PEACE programmes, stewarded by the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB), have helped cultivate what can be understood as a peace ecosystem across Northern Ireland and the border counties of Ireland.

Those six bordering counties of Ireland – Cavan, Donegal, Leitrim, Louth, Monaghan and Sligo – were directly impacted by the conflict in Northern Ireland and are essential to fostering long-term peace and economic stability across the island.

Rather than a series of discrete interventions, the PEACE Programmes have woven a lattice of interconnected social, economic, cultural and political initiatives that embed peace in everyday life. SEUPB's stewardship approach has enabled adaptation to shifting political conditions at local, national and regional levels, sustaining peace as an ecosystem beyond formal agreements and one-off outcomes. Northern Ireland therefore offers a rare, longitudinal example of adaptive ecosystem peacebuilding in practice, with ongoing relevance both locally and for other societies navigating transitions away from conflict.

This brief positions Northern Ireland as a system-level case of ecosystem peacebuilding, illustrating how long-term, adaptive programming can sustain peace beyond formal agreements. However, despite its significance, Northern Ireland's peace ecosystem remains under-theorised and insufficiently analysed as a system in its own right. This points to a wider research gap: how such ecosystems are cultivated, governed, and sustained over time—and how they adapt to evolving political and societal conditions. This gap is reinforced by a broader tendency to treat Northern Ireland as a completed case, rather than an evolving system.

NORTHERN IRELAND NOT 'CASE CLOSED'

Northern Ireland's peacebuilding success is widely recognised. Yet as the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement's 30th anniversary nears, a perception has taken hold that it is now "case closed", as though its central challenges have been resolved and its lessons largely exhausted for contemporary peace processes elsewhere.

This view is misleading. Northern Ireland is not a settled outcome, but an evolving system in which peace continues to be negotiated, contested, and adapted. Less recognised is that it remains a site of ongoing innovation in peacebuilding and implementation, with insights emerging from the ecosystem approach exemplified by the SEUPB and the PEACE programmes.



WHAT IS ECOSYSTEM PEACEBUILDING?

Traditional peacemaking, focused on top-down elite agreements, is increasingly challenged by today's more volatile global context, particularly in its ability to sustain peace over time.

Ecosystem peacebuilding starts from a different premise: that formal peace agreements are only a starting point, and that *durable* peace depends on cultivating a wider ecosystem of networked and inter-connected peacebuilding activity across society, especially in fragmented or segregated contexts.

The approach is grounded in ecosystem thinking, which views organisations and communities as interconnected systems rather than independent or isolated actors. It also draws on the concept of 'civic ecosystems' pioneered by Marika Theros and Iavor Rangelov at the London School of Economics (LSE), defined as "self organising systems of diverse and interdependent social actors held together by shared civic values".¹

An ecosystem approach recognises that peacebuilding must move across layers of society, connecting civic networks, business interests, administrative authorities and institutions at local, national and cross-border levels.

Peace becomes embedded through the interaction of multiple, evolving arrangements across political, economic and social arenas. Critically, the capacity to adapt these arrangements over time is what sustains peace in practice.

By centring the often-underrepresented insights and capacities of local actors, a civic ecosystem approach helps expand and weave together a wider constellation of peace-minded actors. This helps to ground peace more deeply in society, strengthens resilience to political shocks, and enables decision-makers to move beyond short-term interventions toward longer-term strategies that strengthen the system as a whole over time.

ECOSYSTEM PEACEBUILDING IN ACTION: THE PEACE PROGRAMMES

Ecosystem peacebuilding is most clearly demonstrated through the PEACE programmes, which provide a rare longitudinal example of how peace can be cultivated, deepened and sustained over time – and which should continue to be supported in Northern Ireland and the border counties of Ireland.

Since 1994, successive programmes cultivated and sustained an adaptive ecosystem aligned with, and formally attached to, the wider institutional architecture established by the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement. This continuity is a key element of its effectiveness.

Rather than deliver short-term outputs, sustained PEACE programming enabled the gradual weaving of interdependent activities across social, economic and political spheres.

This, in turn, allowed programmes to respond to evolving societal needs, while reinforcing the resilience of the wider peace process during periods of political instability. It illustrates one of the defining features of ecosystem peacebuilding: the capacity of interconnected systems to adapt and sustain resilience when formal political processes or one part of the system stalls.

¹ Rangelov, I. & Theros, M. (2023) Civic ecosystems and social innovation: From collaboration to complementarity. *Global Policy*, 14, 797–804.



Peacemaking is ecosystem building. The task is to work with how conditions for peace emerge and change over time, while embedding arrangements at different levels that complement one another and enable people to live in dignity, safety, and with hope for the future.”

‘Insights from Multilayered Peacemaking: Peace and an Adaptive Ecosystem’ Theros et al (2025)

Each phase of the PEACE programmes contributed to building and developing a peace ecosystem in distinct ways:

PEACE 1 (1995–1999) laid the foundations by prioritising wide participation across society. Focused on addressing the immediate legacy of conflict, it was designed around small grants and accessible entry points to extend engagement and ownership beyond elite actors to ensure diverse actors were invited into the peace system. This early phase generated the social capital and trust needed for more complex forms of collaboration later on. It was also one of the first times funding was being administered by statutory agencies and charities, not central government. It brought the administrations into direct contact with civic society.

PEACE II (2000–2006) expanded the ecosystem both horizontally and vertically. The introduction of an agreed definition of reconciliation helped direct and deepen the relationships initiated under PEACE I’s more ‘introductory’ initiatives. Recognising that peace and prosperity are mutually reinforcing, PEACE II expanded into economic development and investments in employment, skills, enterprise, and cross-border cooperation. The establishment of the SEUPB as the Managing Authority redoubled commitment to sustained stewardship rather than one-off solutions. At the same time, elected representatives across political divides, alongside the statutory sector, business and trade unions were brought together in the allocation and governance of funds, embedding shared responsibility within the ecosystem.

PEACE III (2007–2013) reflected adaptive learning. It consolidated earlier gains while shifting focus toward a shared future, addressing persistent physical segregation and targeting disadvantaged communities. Building on lessons from previous phases, it expanded social and economic engagement both across communities and across the Irish border. The programme placed greater emphasis on excluded sectors and disadvantaged areas, further embedding and operationalising the concept of reconciliation within the evolving ecosystem.

PEACE IV (2014–2020) expanded the ecosystem with strategic emphasis on long-term, structural change. While reinforcing progress across existing themes, it also responded to emerging societal challenges by “promoting social inclusion, combating poverty and any discrimination.” In practice, PEACE IV invested heavily in shared spaces, shared services, and initiatives focused on children and young people. These interventions went beyond the provision of facilities or services, as many have been the case in earlier programmes. Instead, they reshaped patterns of interaction, normalised contact across difference, and created environments in which new relationships could take root. The emphasis on sustained and meaningful cross-community engagement sought to foster shared understandings of the past and drive deeper changes in attitudes and behaviour. These shared space initiatives functioned as new physical and relational “nodes” within the ecosystem. At the same time, a new focus on mental health, trauma recovery, and change through understanding reflected the programme’s adaptation to the longer-term social consequences of conflict.

PEACEPLUS (2021–2027) represents the most integrated articulation of ecosystem peacebuilding to date. By combining the PEACE programmes with INTERREG - which previously operated in parallel as an EU programme to address the economic and social effects of the border, PEACEPLUS reflects a more fully integrated approach, recognising the interdependence of peace, reconciliation, cross-border cooperation, economic regeneration, and environmental sustainability. Its emphasis on co-designed local action plans and broad-based consultations at all levels signals a maturing ecosystem - positioning communities, councils and institutions as co-producers of peace rather than passive beneficiaries. Mental health and well-being are now embedded as cross-cutting priorities, representing a significant investment in breaking the cycle of intergenerational trauma and addiction issues prevalent in post-conflict societies.

ECOSYSTEM INSIGHTS FOR ELSEWHERE

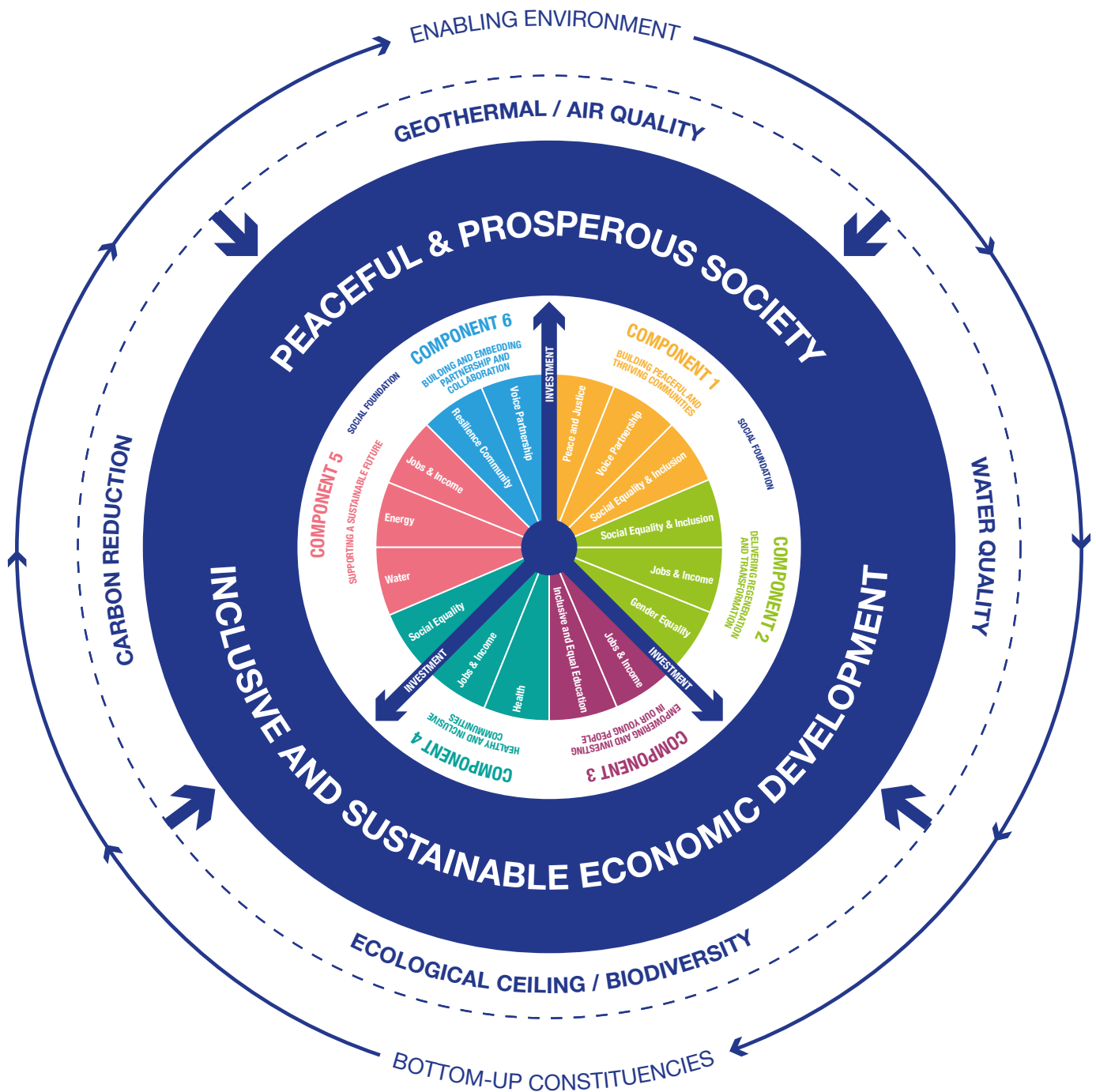
Viewing Northern Ireland through an ecosystem peacebuilding lens challenges the perception that it is ‘case closed’ in terms of lesson-sharing. Three decades on from the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, Northern Ireland remains a living laboratory, continuing to generate insights into how long-term stewardship, inclusive engagement, and layered interventions can embed peace in complex societies.

Key insights from this experience include:

- 1 Interconnection with Continuous Adaptation:** Peace is not produced by a single agreement or moment but “is shaped through multiple, evolving and interacting arrangements across arenas, not a single agreement or moment.”² As Theros et al underline, the “ability to construct, amend and adjust these arrangements over time is critical.” In Northern Ireland and the six border counties of Ireland, successive PEACE programmes enabled the long-term cultivating of a society-wide ecosystem. Continuous adaptation, through learning, iteration and reconfiguration of priorities, has gradually deepened trust, collaboration, and community resilience.
- 2 Resilience Through Distributed Collaboration:** Binding diverse actors into an interconnected ecosystem ensures that peace is not dependent on any single institution or actor. Shared ownership distributes responsibility across the ecosystem, reducing fragility and ensuring resilience preventing unravelling if participation shifts. This interconnectedness allows the ecosystem to adapt rather than collapse when individual actors disengage.
- 3 From Participation To Co-Design:** Over time, sustained collaboration across sectors, levels, and communities enables a shift from participation to co-design. Actors move from engaging in initiatives to shaping them collectively. These layered relationships and shared agency strengthen community capacities and reinforce system-wide resilience. An ecosystem of peace depends on distributed capacities to navigate and adapt evolving arrangements as conditions change.³
- 4 Cross Border and Multi-Level Integration:** Peace is more likely to endure when it is not confined to a single jurisdiction. The cross-border design of the PEACE Programmes connected local, regional, and cross-border systems, transcending administrative boundaries and more effectively addressing structural inequalities more effectively. This multi-level design also encouraged actors at different scales (from local councils to national authorities) to participate in a shared peacebuilding environment – ensuring that if one part of the system stalls, others can sustain momentum.
- 5 Evolve with Society:** As societies transition out of conflict, challenges shift from immediate post-conflict needs to deeper, more complex structural issues. Ecosystem peacebuilding responds by designing multiple, interlinked interventions that can evolve and address changing dimensions of conflict and peace. In Northern Ireland and the six border counties of Ireland, the progression from PEACE I’s focus on wide-ranging participation to PEACEPLUS’ integrated, multi-dimensional approach reflects how new societal challenges emerged as the peace ecosystem matured. This highlights the need for a constellation of adaptive interventions, rather than a linear or one-off peacebuilding strategy.

² M. Theros et al. (2025) *Insights from Multilayered Peacemaking: Peace as an Adaptive Ecosystem*, Civic Ecosystems Initiative.

³ *ibid*



PEACEPLUS outlines the objectives of supporting a peaceful and prosperous society for all the citizens of the region, with inclusive and sustainable economic development, while balancing this with the environmental boundary of doing no harm to the planet. The blue circle represents that balance. If people are within the centre of the doughnut, they have fallen short of having their needs met, and if the outer boundary of the circle is breached we have harmed the planet. The investment areas selected within the Programme support citizens to prosper while at the same time protecting the environment.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

The experience of SEUPB and the PEACE programmes represents one of the few long-term, system-level examples of *sustained* peacebuilding in practice.

Over three decades, successive investments, institutional continuity, political will and adaptive programming have cultivated a peace ecosystem capable of embedding and maintaining peace over time. This challenges conventional approaches that prioritise short-term stabilisation or discrete interventions, highlighting instead the importance of sustained, system-wide engagement.

For Northern Ireland and the six border counties of Ireland, the ecosystem created through SEUPB remains both a political achievement and an ongoing process.

Continued investment is essential to sustain a system that has stabilised a historically segregated society under evolving political and social pressures. Given current domestic and international dynamics, it is unlikely that such institutional architecture – like SEUPB and the PEACE programmes – could be created today, if it did not already exist. That alone is reason for those who contributed to them to celebrate them, and sustain them.

For other conflict contexts, the central implication is clear: peace is not secured through agreements alone, but through institutional architectures and sustained investment capable of supporting continuous adaptation across society.

Northern Ireland offers a practical example of how such systems can be built and maintained over time.

As global conflict settings become more fragmented and protracted, there is a growing need to better understand, document, and translate these lessons into approaches that support long-term, adaptive peacebuilding elsewhere.

Northern Ireland offers important lessons for other conflict-affected contexts. Its experience demonstrates that peace endures not because conflict disappears, but because societies develop the capacity to manage difference, adapt to change, and renew relationships over time. This is an opportune moment to refocus attention on Northern Ireland— and to draw on SEUPB's three decades of practical experience as a resource for societies navigating their own challenges and transitions.

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