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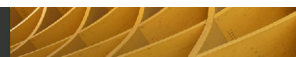
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# EU PEACE funding: The policy implementation deficit

Colin Knox<sup>1</sup>  | Karl O'Connor<sup>2</sup>  | Markus Ketola<sup>3</sup>  | Paul Carmichael<sup>2</sup> 

<sup>1</sup>Graduate School of Public Policy, Nazarbayev University, Astana, Kazakhstan

<sup>2</sup>School of Applied Social and Policy Sciences, Ulster University, Belfast, UK

<sup>3</sup>School of Social and Political Science, Edinburgh University, Edinburgh, UK

## Correspondence

Markus Ketola.

Email: [markus.ketola@ed.ac.uk](mailto:markus.ketola@ed.ac.uk)

## Abstract

This article explores the intersection of policy implementation, conflict/peacebuilding, and the role of the EU PEACE program in Northern Ireland (NI). Conflict societies see a great investment of external funds, attempting to promote conflict resolution. Specifically, this article analyses the fourth wave of such funding in NI to examine why the EU PEACE program has not fully brought about its intended policy outcomes. Using Matland's conflict-ambiguity model of policy implementation, we identify how EU funds can be skewed to support local political interests. Simultaneously, the EU PEACE program continues to adhere to strict implementation criteria that makes little sense given the local context. Therefore, contrary to its objectives, the implementation of EU funding can compound rather than ameliorate divisions in post-conflict NI. Instead of prescribing strict implementation criteria, EU policy could focus on improving the administrative capacity and discretion of local administration in devising locally relevant implementation strategies.

## KEYWORDS

administrative capacity, European Union, Northern Ireland, policy implementation, postconflict

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## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Northern Ireland (NI) serves as a fascinating laboratory for exploring how public policy and administration, and their implementation, have been shaped by both the impact of longstanding political conflict alongside the influence of the European Union (EU) in this contested region. What happens to policy implementation when long-term conflict becomes a permanent feature of the policy landscape, such as the situation in NI both during and indeed since the troubles, given the fitful and conflict-ridden nature of devolution? Moreover, conflict societies often attract the investment of external resources aimed at facilitating conflict resolution. In NI's case, the largest donor of such external funds has been the EU which has been instrumental in providing a positive impetus to peacebuilding and fostering improved community relations within the region and cross-border relations with the Republic of Ireland.

The role of the EU in helping to broker a lasting peace for NI has been amply documented. However, less well understood are aspects of the implementation and impact of these programs. In particular, the literature on how the EU's PEACE programs interact with postconflict contexts remains both rare and inconsistent, and which "remains theoretically and empirically underdeveloped" (Lagana, 2021, p. 4). The resulting lacuna is significant, meriting closure for two reasons. In terms of academic discourse, our understanding of policy implementation in such circumstances would benefit from a better appreciation of the challenges posed when operating within a conflict setting. Additionally, significant sums of public money are disbursed through these programs, raising important questions regarding the processes involved and the efficacy of such interventions. Brexit compounds the complexities of seeking to implement peacebuilding initiatives in NI, indeed, threatening to destabilize the work already undertaken in this regard, underscoring the urgency for narrowing our knowledge gap.

In this paper, therefore, we explore the intersection of these three themes: policy implementation, conflict/peacebuilding, and the role of the EU and of EU policies in that process within NI. Specifically, our research is focused on the fourth iteration of the EU peace program in NI (PEACE IV). It shows that, despite substantial investment of EU resources, key policy outcomes in NI have remained largely the same. By using Matland's (1995) conflict-ambiguity model of studying the process of policy implementation, we demonstrate failures across two axes that lead to the policy implementation deficit in NI: the prevalence of high conflict over the goals of implementation and the absence of discretion (low ambiguity) in the means of implementation.

The high conflict emerges in two ways. First, the political actors at the local level are primarily motivated by serving the short-term interests of their own ethnopolitical community and maximizing the resources they can deliver to their constituents. This leads to persistent conflict between the two communities at the local government level, with direct consequences for how the PEACE IV program has been implemented on the ground (Carmichael & Knox, 1999). The actions of the EU bureaucracy, on the other hand, are primarily motivated by the short-term interests of protecting the financial interests of member states and ensuring that resources are spent in an accountable and transparent manner.

In turn, this leads to very precise and overly rigid means of implementation, where the absence of discretion leads to ineffective implementation. As Matland notes, quoting Turkey (1962), "Far better an approximate answer to the *right* question, which is often very vague, than an exact answer to the wrong question, which can always be made precise" (1995, p. 158). The delivery of PEACE IV faced a policy implementation challenge created by the "high conflict—low ambiguity" scenario we observe in NI. Following Matland, we further highlight the importance of

disaggregating between the long-term *goals* of policy implementation and short-term *means* of implementation. While low ambiguity regarding the goals of policy implementation may be conducive to successful policy outcomes, in a high-conflict context, low ambiguity regarding means of policy implementation may further compromise policy outcomes.

As outlined by Martinsen et al. (2022), EU governance faces a fundamental implementation dilemma: while the demand for EU policies increases, the competence to implement and enforce policies remains with member states, or subnational authorities. The study has implications for the design of European, national and other, philanthropic funding, and for the operationalization of such funding at local and regional level. It adds to recent research (Blom-Hansen et al., 2022; Thomann, 2015; Zhelyazkova & Thomann, 2022) in EU implementation studies that examine the complexity of implementing European public policy at the street level by exploring how policy implementation unfolds differently from that envisaged by policy designers.

The article is organized as follows. We begin with an overview of EU external funding frameworks, including PEACE IV. These debates are then located within the conceptual framework of Matland's policy implementation model and applied in the Northern Irish policy context. Then, we present evidence using a case study of one Northern Irish local authority that depicts the ineffectiveness of some recent PEACE IV policy interventions. Finally, we use Matland's policy implementation framework to explain how the EU PEACE IV policy intervention suffers from an implementation deficit: the policy design perpetuates existing, divided resource allocation patterns rather than supporting policies that will permanently reduce division between the two traditional communities in NI (Catholic and Protestant).

## 2 | THE EU PEACE PROGRAM IN CONTEXT

Much has been written about the political settlement in NI culminating in the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement 1998 and the associated devolved arrangements for local politicians to participate in power-sharing regional government (Horowitz, 2002; McCrudden et al., 2016; McGarry & O'Leary, 2006; Wolff, 2007). Since then, political institutions, the NI Assembly and Executive, have faltered and remain precarious over the latest stumbling block, the NI Protocol, in maintaining sustained and stable government (Kelly & Tannam, 2022; Whitten, 2022). Notwithstanding the on-off nature of devolution at the macropolitical level, longstanding divisions which separate the two main communities in NI remain largely immutable. Microlevel peacebuilding and reconciliation therefore remains a work-in-progress underpinned by structural factors such as segregated housing, education, sports, and culture. The so-called "peace dividend" is elusive for many low-income groups whose lives and prospects have otherwise changed little as a result of the political settlement (Department for Communities Northern Ireland, 2022). These entrenched societal divisions are, in part, a legacy of the "troubles" where communities felt safe living amongst their own ethnic-national neighbors but have remained in place because the political system reflects these divisions and parties draw electoral support from segregated communities. For example, the two largest political parties (DUP and Sinn Fein) gained 50% of the first preference votes in the 2022 NI Assembly election. In 1998, the two largest parties attracted 43% of the first preference votes. Ethno-national divisions are becoming more embedded.

The role of the EU, particularly in respect of high politics, within NI has also been amply documented (see, e.g., Buchanan, 2008; Hayward & Murphy, 2012; McCall, 2014; Teague, 1996).

Most recently, Lagana has extensively recounted the painstaking approach of the EU which, through its Structural Funds, as well INTERREG and PEACE, serves as an instructive case with regard to general patterns of international and EU peacebuilding (2021). Adopting a strategic rational approach, Lagana places the concept of metagovernance at the center of the EU's peacebuilding approach. The EU "subsided policy networks and interest groups with tools to circumvent the centrality of the two nation-states involved" (2021, p. 11). Thus, as an honest broker, the EU has displayed an enduring political commitment since the early 1980s. The EU's innovative approach has promoted positive-sum politics in NI, representing a force for good that commanded cross-community support and engagement. To that end, "governments and network governance have both remained central with the EU strategy of peace building" (2020, p. 10). The "main achievement of the EU in building peace on the island of Ireland was one of empowering marginalised voices towards peace and reconciliation" (2020, p. 12). In keeping with the precepts of subsidiarity, the EU's process has stressed what Lederach (1997) described as "peacebuilding from below," encompassing a bottom-up approach embedded in "grassroots leadership" (cited in Lagana, 2021, p. 26). However, good intentions can fall prey to lapses and shortcomings in implementation. As Marsh (2011) observed, powerful actors can even halt or distort the implementation of public policies and there has been "considerable negative social energy, which impacted on the effectiveness of EU peacebuilding mechanisms" (cited in Lagana, 2021, p. 34). Nonetheless, "the 'government of governance' (or metagovernance) provided democratic anchorage where the EU 'as metagovernor' could exercise its soft power in a pluricentric context" (2021, p. 36). As Lagana observed, "this was not a perfect process and it is not yet concluded" (2021, p. 37)—our research identifies and explores some of those imperfections in this complex theater of multilevel governance.

While macrolevel political transformation is necessary, it is not sufficient. Attempts at long-term peacebuilding and reconciliation must include a focus on work at community level. This approach is informed by conceptual models most closely associated with Lederach (1996), Galtung (1969), and Galtung and Fischer (2013). Galtung delineated between "negative" and "positive" peace. The former is the absence of violence, whereas the latter requires peace builders to address the multiple manifestations of structural and cultural violence. Building positive peace demands activities at three levels: at the macrolevel, politicians, police, and senior officials; the mesolevel, business community, trade unions, religious leaders, academics and think tanks; and the microlevel, NGOs, the voluntary and community sectors, and local activists. These levels must be interdependent rather than hierarchical (Lederach & Appleby, 2010). Work at the community level was predicated on positive intergroup contact between Protestants and Catholics based on certain conditions: contact must be of nonadversarial quality; groups afforded equal status; over a long period of time; and in pursuit of cooperative or superordinate goals. In addition, the context should have supportive institutional structures, the agreement of authorities and a broader normative climate of improved intergroup relations (Aiken, 2013; Hewstone et al., 2006). This contact model has informed subsequent iterations of EU PEACE initiatives in NI and continues to play a central role in the toolbox of public policy implementation supported by the EU in the region.

PEACE is a unique policy arrangement not matched anywhere else in the EU. Initially created in 1995, as a direct result of the EU's well-intentioned desire to make a positive response to the paramilitary ceasefires of 1994, some €2.2bn has been invested in the four iterations of the EU's PEACE program for NI and the border counties of the Republic of Ireland, with some €270 m linked to PEACE IV alone. Over 22,500 individual projects have been funded because of this additional funding (European Union, 2022). While a significant

funding intervention, it is targeted at NI (population 1.9 m), which has total public expenditure of c.£30bn (Office for National Statistics, 2022), and the border counties (Donegal, Sligo, Leitrim, Cavan, Monaghan, and Louth).

Along with the UK and Irish Governments, and academic observers, the EU has frequently presented NI as a “model” for conflict management, but it is not clear what the substantive elements of the model are or whether or how lessons have been transferred to other cases, such as the Western Balkans, Israel/Palestine, and South Africa. Throughout this literature, however, the role played by the design and implementation of such policies has received less attention. In his comparative analysis, therefore, Hughes (2009a, 2009b) considered the impact of the EU’s immense funding on peacebuilding and reconciliation on NI and Kosovo, and how its capacity has developed over the period, contending that the tensions and contradictions in EU policy are illustrated in both cases. He concluded that the core features of the political accommodation in NI are the nature of the consociational institutions, the virtual absence of transitional justice, and the policy acceptance of the segregated social structures. Such lessons, he argued, are not easily compatible with the EU declaratory policy on conflict management.

The role of the EU in supporting peacebuilding efforts was described as an “external ethnoguarantor” which provided social and economic support in recognition that “power sharing on its own is not a panacea to settle the NI conflict” (Byrne, 2001, p. 341). These exogenous actors also included the British and Irish government and the International Fund for Ireland. Early economic support packages (INTERREG) funded by the EU in NI had been deemed unsuccessful because of cross-border co-operation (North and Republic of Ireland) integral to their design, as Unionists were apprehensive of a wider all-Ireland political agenda (Lagana, 2017). Research on PEACE was more positive about Unionists’ involvement in projects located in the Republic of Ireland (McCall & O’Dowd, 2008). The EU’s PEACE model was predicated on community groups, or civil society more generally, being the conduit to grassroots peacebuilding. The intention was that directing funding through these groups would help to address economic deprivation and structural inequalities that compounded sectarian divisions. However, an early evaluation of the impact of EU economic funding was ambivalent in its findings. Community group recipients concluded that economic aid had not built cross-community ties because “each community, on a single identity basis, needs to revitalize itself on its own terms before it can work for cross-community economic development and reconciliation” (Byrne & Irvin, 2001, p. 426). This call for single-identity work became a constant refrain from community groups eager to attract EU funding without the need for cross-community work. Such behavior was described as group narcissism which tended to reinforce rather than transform ethnic differences (Ryan, 1996).

In other words, the implementation of the PEACE model of funding, along with the approach adopted by the UK government and other international funders, is predicated on the idea that connections between the two communities were an “intrinsic good,” desirable in and of themselves. Drawing heavily on social capital theory, it is a policy model where the number of vertical connections between government and communities (linking social capital), together with horizontal connections between the two communities (bridging social capital) come to be understood as a resource that makes policy happen (Davies, 2011). The aim of the policy becomes the generation of networks that help mobilize cooperative dispositions within and between communities, a resource that can be drawn on, in a strategic way, to deliver policy objectives (Hughes & Ketola, 2021).

This focus on cross-community connections and contacts as a conduit to a successful policy outcome of reconciliation has been questioned by many. For example, scholars criticize the

EU's identity-based conception of the conflict operationalized through "the use of crude categories (such as the number of Catholics and Protestants attending events) to measure outcomes of its projects, which some contend serves to reinforce rather than transcend divisions" (Hayward, 2006, p. 276). An evaluation of PEACE II funding also raised some doubts about the efficacy of EU support because competition for funding "led to disparity and distrust in some communities" (Byrne et al., 2009, p. 360). However, the evaluators appealed for more time to build trust and good will—peacebuilding is not a quick fix and EU support should be seen as a long-term commitment. A separate review of both PEACE I and II raised questions as to whether political stalemate at the macrolevel limited the contributions that EU funding at the community level might have: "the limited impact of the EU PEACE raises a central theoretical question for multilevel approaches to conflict resolution and peace-building" (Racioppi & O'Sullivan See, 2007, p. 384).

The EU model changed in the transition to PEACE III with local authorities accorded a more leading role in the design and implementation of the program. This move attracted criticism that key features, decentralization and involvement of community groups, were lost (Buchanan, 2008). More recent scholarship on EU support for peacebuilding in NI concluded that "the administrative models adopted for INTERREG and PEACE I and II did not achieve the results hoped for by the EU Commission in those years" (Lagana, 2021, p. 179). Evaluation of PEACE III found 'mixed perceptions among funding recipients regarding the effectiveness and the implications of peacebuilding projects' and called for future quantitative and qualitative analysis "which cover both the tangible and intangible results achieved by these initiatives" (Skarlato et al., 2016, pp. 176–177).

Existing scholarship, therefore, highlights a number of points. First, evaluations to date of the impact of EU PEACE funding offer mixed evidence of success largely captured from the experiences of recipients and providers of funding. Second, assessments thus far do not include evidence of PEACE IV, which has been recently completed. Third, all the academic studies have examined PEACE initiatives through the lens of literature on peacebuilding and reconciliation (above). Fourth, the current model of peace funding focuses on the development of cross-community connections, leading to a policy ecosystem characterized by partnerships, collaboration, and community participation, but with little consideration for how this ecosystem facilitates the delivery of policy goals. This research, therefore, aims to fill a research gap by considering PEACE IV through the public policy lens of implementation. It will also adopt the EU's own quantitative criteria for evaluating the success of PEACE IV supplemented by qualitative evidence from providers and participants in the initiative.

### **3 | CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: POLICY IMPLEMENTATION, AMBIGUITY, CONFLICT**

For our case study, the Matland framework helpfully differentiates between the top-down policy prescription of local politicians and EU officials and the competing needs being pushed up from the bottom by local government public servants. Matland's framework puts a conceptual order on this locus of conflict and is therefore must useful as a lens to explain the reasons underpinning an implementation deficit.

Since the seminal work of Pressman and Wildavsky (1973), the literature on policy implementation has burgeoned with an intense competing discourse concerning "top-down" versus "bottom-up" approaches (see, e.g., Gunn, 1978; O'toole, 2004; Sabatier & Mazmanian, 1980;

Saetren, 2005; Van Meter & Van Horn, 1975). As Hood (1976) observed, “perfect implementation” may be elusive, but the “implementation gap” highlighted by Dunsire (1978), illustrates the difficulties inherent in the policy-action relationship, ignoring the agency of those “upon whom action depends” (Hogwood & Gunn, 1984, p. 208). Barrett and Fudge (1981) noted the capacity of these actors to distort or manipulate policy. Such tensions metastasize when competing democratic legitimacies and tiers of government are evident as, despite being formally subordinate, the preferences, prejudices and processes of local agents cannot be ignored, for there is an interdependency among actors which is especially intense when policy is mediated in complex multilevel governance architecture spanning supranational, national, regional and local bodies. In particular, the discretion of “street level bureaucrats” to decisively shape and influence implementation remains telling (Tummers & Bekkers, 2014). The added value of Matland’s framework is in its sensitivity to the interdependency of the actors associated with the top-down and bottom-up approaches, and in incorporating.

When that operating context is characterized by entrenched societal conflict, our understanding of policy interventions and their associated implementation requires still more nuanced theoretical modeling. As Jensen et al. (2018), contend in their own work on the use of “projects” as a tool of policy implementation, Matland’s (1995) framework remains insightful in aiding understanding of how the degree of conflict and ambiguity in policy impacts on the process of implementation. Therefore, our theoretical basis also rests on Matland’s framework as a useful starting point for understanding the outworking of the PEACE IV program in NI. Matland outlines two key parameters of implementation. The first looks at ambiguity, where a high degree of ambiguity allows for a high degree of agency and discretion in the implementation process. Ambiguity may exist in relation to either policy goals or means. The second is focused on conflict. A high level of conflict is more closely associated with perceptions of increased stakes for actors and an increase in zero-sum interactions, leading to a preference for conflict resolution mechanisms that draw more on bargaining or coercion approaches. Low conflict situations, in turn, are characterized by lower stakes where mechanisms that draw on persuasion or problem-solving may be relied upon (Matland, 1995). By cross-referencing these parameters, Matland develops a matrix for the analysis of policy implementation which moved beyond traditional “top-down” or “bottom-up” schools of thought (DeLeon & DeLeon, 2002; Hill & Hupe, 2014; Matland, 1995). Rather than reconciling conflict away, as is the case with most consensus-focused theories of implementation, including those focused on network governance (Newman, 2005) or deliverology (Barber, 2007), Matland’s approach centers on understanding the role of conflict in policy implementation, making it most appropriate for our purposes.

## 4 | SITE OF ENQUIRY AND METHODS

Despite significant progress having been made, the need to improve cross-community relations and further integrate divided communities remains real and was the official rationale for a further tranche of funding (EU, 2022). The programming period for 2014–2020, provided an opportunity for continued EU assistance to help address the peace and reconciliation needs of the region. In total, 85% of the Program, representing €229 m is provided through the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF). The remaining €41 m, representing 15%, is match-funding by the Irish Government and the NI Executive. Our specific site of enquiry for this study is one (from 11) local authority which had responsibility for the delivery of PEACE IV.



*Armagh City, Banbridge, and Craigavon Borough Council* (ABC Council) has a population of approximately 178,000 inhabitants and is a demographic microcosm of NI. Our choice of ABC Council was informed by four main factors: the local authority is the second most populous (outside of Belfast) in NI; it contains a mix of urban and rural areas; the researchers were granted unfettered access to all projects, officials, and councilors; and, there has been significant growth in minority ethnic communities living in the district (2021 Census data show that it is the second highest council where “no people have English as their main language”).

#### 4.1 | Peace IV in ABC Council

According to the EU, the core policy objectives of PEACE IV were to support actions that would develop and deepen reconciliation between divided communities; increase tolerance and respect; promote increased community cohesion and contact; enhance cross-border cooperation; and address the legacy of the past. The Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB), the oversight body for PEACE IV, set important preconditions for the award of the grant and funding of activities. Local authorities could exercise discretion through the development of action plans under guidance from SEUPB in which they were “required to identify relevant Peace IV issues in their area” (SEUPB, n.d., p. 6). For ABC Council this included targeting “those communities with low social capital” (SEUPB, n.d., p.9)—minority ethnic groups which made up 3.31% of the council’s population (Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency [NISRA], 2022). ABC’s operational plan therefore included:

- I. The cross-community participation target was: 40% Catholic, Nationalist, Republican (CNR); 50% Protestant, Unionist, Loyalist (PUL); and 10% Black and Minority Ethnic (BME). This is known as the “50-40-10” ratio in PEACE IV parlance.
- II. There must be “sustained, purposeful and meaningful contact” between persons of different backgrounds in line with the objectives of the PEACE IV Program.
- III. Specified number of hours that measured the nature, duration, and intensity of the cross-community activity being proposed for each of the individual initiatives/projects.
- IV. A minimum level of contact specified by SEUPB as circa 6 months/26 h duration for all the activities proposed in the overall program.

ABC Council developed 26 programs within their PEACE IV Program that attracted significant interest and engagement. Since late 2017, €4.93 m EU and NI government funding was spent on 150 projects, spanning the entire council area and bringing communities together through local engagement projects, sport and recreation initiatives, training programs, community grant schemes, capital projects, and cultural, arts, and history events. Working with colleagues spanning several council departments, as well as community groups and local or regional agencies, the PEACE IV Officer Team had responsibility for the overall development and management of the program. The initial timeframe for the program was 39 months (January 2017 to March 2020). Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, however, this period was extended to June 30, 2021.

The methodology adopted is in two stages. First, we consider the impact of the PEACE IV program using data drawn from the NISRA. SEUPB-PEACE IV set quantitative targets against each of its objectives. Although these could not always be disaggregated to the level of local council level, we are able to assess the overall impact of the intervention against the EU’s own

targets. Second, we draw on 24 in-depth interviews conducted between October and December 2019.<sup>1</sup> All local government staff involved in the delivery of PEACE IV activities were interviewed, as well as selected representatives from seven voluntary and community sector organizations associated with PEACE IV projects. These organizations were selected to represent a range of stakeholder experiences from each of the three thematic program areas, and together represent a comprehensive sample, capturing a wide range of experiences from the heart of PEACE IV policy delivery within ABC Council area. Our interview questions were open-ended, prompting participants to reflect on their experiences as well as on the opportunities and challenges the program had presented. This enabled us to gather rich and detailed information while retaining a systematic approach to data collection. Our overarching aim was to better understand what had worked well, and what could be learnt about the effective administration of PEACE programs from the experience of the ABC Council. The first two interviews were group interviews with the majority of the Peace IV team present, aimed at identifying key themes concerning any important milestones in the overall policy process, the main opportunities the program presented to address local needs, as well as its main challenges. Following this, the subsequent 22 interviews (including individual interviews with those who participated in the first two interviews) invited the participants to describe their own experience of the PEACE IV process chronologically, recounting the various stages of implementation, followed by questions on the opportunities and challenges that they had identified, or those that were outlined in the first group interviews. In this way, we retained a degree of flexibility in our use of the interview guide, with sufficient scope to steer away from it to reflect the respondent's particular area of expertise/experiences, and ensuring the interviews remained respondent-led.

All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded using Nvivo software. Our coding method was inductive in the first instance: upon first reading, we generated broad categories of initial codes mapping our first impressions against the project aims. Following a review of the initial coding exercise, we focused on a limited number of themes we deemed to be most relevant to our analysis. At this stage, a key focus of our analysis was on the relationships between the policy actors (SEUPB, council officers, voluntary sector, participants) in the context of operationalising the PEACE funding program. Then, these codes were developed further during subsequent readings, extracting the most salient aspects of the interview data. In so doing, we were primarily interested in better understanding how the policy change that was intended to flow from PEACE IV was operationalised (or not), reflecting the experiences of the interviewees, with emphasis on codes that focused on operationalization (e.g., 26 contact hours, 50-40-10 participant relations). The final stage involved relating our interview data with Matland's (1995) four-fold framework.

## 5 | FINDINGS

### 5.1 | The impact of the program

The PEACE program was built around three thematic areas, which had EU-specified objectives and impacts as follows: Building Positive Relations; Shared Spaces and Services; and, Children and Young People. We attempted to access data which replicated NI wide indicators at the level of ABC Council but found gaps in the type and level of data available. We set out the proposed impacts of PEACE IV against the EU objectives in Tables 1–3. In other words, these were the EU's a priori impact measures and targets for the PEACE IV Program.

TABLE 1 Building positive relations.

EU objective	EU impact measures	Results			
Promote positive relations characterized by respect, where cultural diversity is celebrated and people can live, learn and socialize together, free from prejudice, hate and intolerance.	(i) An increase in the percentage of people who think relations between Protestants and Catholics are better than they were 5 years ago from 45% to 52%.	<b>Are relations between Protestants and Catholics in ABC Council better than they were 5 years ago?</b>			
		Periods	Better (%)	Worse (%)	About the same (%)
		2014–2016 ( <i>n</i> = 443)	57.8	3.4	32.3
		2016–2018 ( <i>n</i> = 450)	55.3	3.3	32.9
		2018–2020 ( <i>n</i> = 411)	41.4	12.7	38.9
		<b>Will relations between Protestants and Catholics in ABC Council be better in 5 years' time?</b>			
	(ii) An increase in the percentage of people who think relations between Protestants and Catholics will be better in 5 years' time from 40% to 48%.	Periods	Better (%)	Worse (%)	About the same (%)
		2014–2016 ( <i>n</i> = 443)	49.9	3.4	37
		2016–2018 ( <i>n</i> = 451)	43.5	4.9	31.7
		2018–2020 ( <i>n</i> = 413)	32.0	14.0	31.7
		<b>“The culture and traditions of people from different minority ethnic groups add to the richness and diversity of NI society”</b>			
		Periods	Strongly agree/agree (%)	Neither agree nor disagree (%)	Disagree or strongly disagree (%)
(iii) An increase in the percentage of people who know quite a bit about the culture of some minority ethnic communities from 30% to 38%.	2014–2016 ( <i>n</i> = 443)	57.8	24.6	14	
	2016–2018 ( <i>n</i> = 451)	53.9	22	18.4	
	2018–2020 ( <i>n</i> = 411)	56.9	21.9	16.3	

Abbreviations: ABC Council, Armagh City, Banbridge, and Craigavon Borough Council; EU, European Union; NI, Northern Ireland; SEUPB, The Special EU Programmes Body.

Sources: Tables 2–4 have been compiled from the following: *A local authority partnership guide to peace and reconciliation action plans: EU Programme for Peace and Reconciliation 2014–2022* (SEUPB, n.d.); *Northern Ireland Life and Times Surveys; Young Life and Times Surveys; Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NINIS) data.*

TABLE 2 Shared space and services.

EU objective	EU impact measures	Results		
Create a more cohesive society through an increased provision of shared spaces and services.	(i) An increase in the percentage of people who would define the neighborhood where they live as neutral, from 64%, “always or most of the time” to 68%; and from 22%, “sometimes” to 26%. (ii) An increase in the percentage of people who prefer to live in a mixed religion environment from 71% to 75%. (iii) A reduction in the percentage of people who would prefer to live in a neighborhood with people of only their own religion from 20% to 16%.	<b>Would you prefer to live in own religion or mixed religion neighborhood in ABC Council</b>		
		Periods	Own religion only (%)	Mixed neighborhood (%)
		2014–2016 ( <i>n</i> = 443)	18.1	68.4
		2016–2018 ( <i>n</i> = 450)	17.3	72.2
		2018–2020 ( <i>n</i> = 411)	18.7	74.9

Abbreviations: ABC Council, Armagh City, Banbridge, and Craigavon Borough Council; EU, European Union.

We now report how the PEACE IV program performed against the EU's targets under the three thematic areas.

### 5.1.1 | Building positive relations

Are relations between Protestants and Catholics better than they were 5 years ago? The responses are grouped together in three periods (2014–2016; 2016–2018; 2018–2020) and disaggregated at the local government level (see Table 1).

These data show a level of pessimism about the prospects over the next 5 years. Fewer respondents believed relations will improve between Protestants and Catholics over time with a significant increase in those who think things will get worse. In short, respondents increasingly thought relations were worse than 5 years ago and were pessimistic about 5 years hence.

TABLE 3 Children and young people.

EU objective	EU impact measures	Results			
Enhance the capacity of children and young people to form positive and effective relationships with others of a different background and make a positive contribution to building a cohesive society.	An increase in the percentage of 16-year-olds who:	<b>Young people socialize or play sport with those from different religions</b>			
	(i) Socialize or play sport with people from a different religious community “very often” from 43% to 50%, “sometimes” 24% to 28%.	Year			
		2016 ( <i>n</i> = 1009)	Very often	Sometimes	Rarely
		2017 ( <i>n</i> = 1198)	39	26	20
		2018 ( <i>n</i> = 1152)	38	25	18
		2019 ( <i>n</i> = 1171)	37	25	17
	2020/21 ( <i>n</i> = 2069)	38	28	16	
		30	31	20	
		<b>Young people relationships between Protestants and Catholics better than 5 years ago?</b>			
(ii) Think relations between Protestants and Catholics are better than they were 5 years ago from 45% to 50%.	Years	Better (%)	Worse (%)	Same (%)	
	2016 ( <i>n</i> = 1009)	52	4	35	
	2017 ( <i>n</i> = 1198)	46	4	40	
	2018 ( <i>n</i> = 1152)	42	7	42	
	2019 ( <i>n</i> = 1171)	44	5	41	
	2020/2021 ( <i>n</i> = 2069)	27	14	43	
(iii) Think relations between Protestants and Catholics will be better in 5 years' time from 38% to 45%	Years	Better (%)	Worse (%)	Same (%)	
	2016 ( <i>n</i> = 1009)	45	7	38	
	2017 ( <i>n</i> = 1198)	37	10	40	
	2018 ( <i>n</i> = 1152)	31	18	36	
	2019 ( <i>n</i> = 1171)	34	15	38	
	2020/2021 ( <i>n</i> = 2069)	26	20	36	

Abbreviation: EU, European Union.

An important element of building positive relations under Peace IV is about improving relationships with minority ethnic communities. The Peace IV metric, which attempts to capture the impact of this is *an increase in the percentage of people who know quite a bit about the culture of some minority ethnic communities from 30% to 38%*. However, this measurement is not available at the local authority level. In its absence, we report a proxy indicator here. The NI Life and Times survey (2021) asked the question: *How much do you agree or disagree with the following statement: "The culture and traditions of people from different minority ethnic groups add to the richness and diversity of NI society."* The results for ABC Council clustered in 3-year periods are set out in Table 1. The data indicate a varying trend from 2014 onwards: a deterioration to a marginal improvement in attitudes toward minority ethnic groups. We need to be extremely careful how we interpret these findings since they could, for example, be explained by exogenous factors such as the UK-wide debate on, and outcome of, Brexit.

### 5.1.2 | Shared spaces and services

We now consider the NI metrics on shared space and services: (i) an increase in the percentage of people who would define the neighborhood where they live as neutral; (ii) an increase in the percentage of people who prefer to live in a mixed religion environment; and, (iii) a reduction in the percentage of people who would prefer to live in a neighborhood with people of only their own religion. Once again, not all of these are captured at local government level. We report on the one indicator available from The NI Life and Times survey (2021), which asks the question: *Would you prefer to live in your own religion of mixed religion area?* The results for ABC Council in 3-year periods is set out in Table 2.

The data are no more encouraging here and while they show a higher number of ABC respondents preferring to live in mixed religion neighborhoods, those preferring segregated living have also increased.

### 5.1.3 | Children and young people

Although there are no data available at the local council level to assess the impact of Peace IV activities on children and young people, it is worthwhile to consider the indicators at the macro (NI wide) level from the Young Life and Times Survey data. The Young Life and Times Survey (2021) asks: *How often do you socialize or play sport with people from a different religious community?* Aside from not be able to obtain data at the local council level, the Young Life and Times Survey targets respondents who are 16 years old, whereas Peace IV council activities are aimed at young people between the ages of 0–24. So, there is little that can be gleaned at the level of ABC Council from these data, but it may still be useful to examine what are the wider trends. The results at the NI level are shown in Table 3.

The data show there is a significant decline in the percentage of 16-year-olds who socialize or play sport very often with those from a different religion. The Young Life and Times Survey also asks: *Are relations between Protestants and Catholics better than they were 5 years ago?*

The results at the NI-wide level are set out in Table 3. Here again, the trend is of a significantly worsening situation where 16 years old feel that relationships between Protestant and Catholics have deteriorated over the last 5 years.

Moving forward, respondents were asked about the prospects for the next 5 years. The Young Life and Times Survey (2021) asks: *Will relations between Protestants and Catholics be better in 5 years' time?* The results are set out in Table 3. These results confirm the pessimism moving forward, that 16-year-olds think relations between Protestants and Catholics will get significantly worse in 5 years' time. This can be difficult to explain as we know from researching Peace IV in ABC Council that young people seem to care less about traditional cleavages and prefer not to be labeled in this way because they are “Millennium children” who have no direct experience of the “troubles” (McGrellis, 2010). Overall, the data presented offer a pessimistic picture of “positive relations” and “children and young people.” It is important to note that PEACE IV has been implemented within the macro environment of Brexit and the NI Protocol, the Covid-19 pandemic, and a suspension of the regional parliament between 2017 and 2020.

## 5.2 | Stakeholder views

The secondary data analysis on the impact of PEACE IV present us with our key puzzle: why has over €2 billion in peace funding not been able to deliver the expected outcomes? This observation invites us to investigate more deeply—and, bearing in mind the gaps in the available quantitative data, qualitatively—as to why this might be the case. First, this allows us to highlight examples of good practice hidden from view by the headline figures and to suggest that policymakers should focus on *processes* around norms, capacity building, and development of local on-the-shelf policy options, rather than changes in societal attitudes and behaviors. Second, it also encourages us to investigate more deeply the misaligned interests between the EU and local level and how these play out in the operationalization of the PEACE IV program, affirming rather than reforming the political status quo. In this section, we map our interview data onto Matland's (1995) quadrant, highlighting why PEACE has failed to shift the metrics and highlight some lessons for future rounds of funding. Let us now consider the reasons behind these results through the prism of Matland's (1995) quadrant.

## 6 | DISCUSSION

While financial accountability has been ensured through the rigorous reporting requirements of SEUPB, the results clearly demonstrate that the macropolitical aim of the program in terms of “securing the peace” has not been met. The implementation of the peace process is situated within a local political environment of high conflict, where the strict quotas for participation and metrics-based accountability measures is combined with low ambiguity. In such scenarios, “dissension occurs because these clearly defined goals are incompatible” with the goals of the local politicians (Matland, 1995, p. 163). Most local politicians in contested societies serve single-identity communities and, therefore, have an interest in perpetuating, or at best, managing differences rather than resolving differences (Connolly & Knox, 1988; Knox, 1995).

“While there is an explicit policy, essential resources are controlled by sceptical actors ... actively opposed to the proposed policy” (Matland, 1995, p. 164). In our case, the local government holds all the implementation tools. In his quadrant, Matland (1995) expects the environment to have more influence on implementation than the administration. Bureaucrats, therefore, find it difficult to shift the policy to the top left quadrant (low ambiguity—low

conflict). Their best alternative is to secure the compliance of actors whose resources are vital to policy success by “either having sufficient power to force one’s will on the participants or having sufficient resources to be able to bargain an agreement on means” (Matland, 1995, p. 164). In such scenarios, “agreement on goals is unnecessary, agreement on actions is sufficient ... disputes are resolved through side payments, log rolling, oversight, or ambiguity” (Matland, 1995, p. 64). As we will see below, this phrase from Matland sums up the implementation of Peace IV.

While policy implementation has abided by the EU rules, through local political bargaining and remunerative reward and alternative funding streams, local political agreement on actions has been found wanting. The goals of the program have not been embraced by local politicians. Division remains and is indeed increasing, partly supported by a PEACE system that, despite best policy intentions, is inadvertently maintaining difference. We will also see, in line with Matland, that following the adoption stage, local political leaders have “little interest in the implementation stage” (1995, p. 165). Officials now assume control of implementation, carefully balancing the EU rules and the local political agreement on implementation. This shift results to both administrative, and occasionally, experimental implementation. Table 4 sums up the process.

In the next section, we present further qualitative evidence, based on our interviews and observations of programs, to support the claims made above.

## 7 | POLICY OUTCOMES

EU funding supports policies channeled through institutions and organizations that are highly motivated to translate external financial support from outside to serve local needs. When low-ambiguity administrative implementation meets high-conflict political implementation, resource allocation is likely to be skewed by local actors that leads, at best, to incomplete implementation and, at worst, misappropriation of the EU programs for alternative purposes. As one interviewee observed:

A member must look after their constituent area which could be a single identity area and they’ll know how to do that. That’s just how the partisan politics work, and ultimately, this is what everyone needs to do to get elected. (Interview 9)

This interviewee alludes to the continuing dominance of the existing ethnopolitical communities, where any injection of external resources is valued not only for its potential to improve well-being, but for its political value within a given community. While there is little

**TABLE 4** Peace IV implementation.

Policy stage	Actors with most influence	Matland quadrant
Macropolicy design	EU level	Political implementation
Local program design	Local politicians	Political implementation
Implementation	Local bureaucrats	Administrative/experimental implementation

Abbreviation: EU, European Union.



new in highlighting such political maneuvering around resources at the local level, in the context of PEACE funding, it creates a gordian knot right at the heart of the program:

There was a school ... with no outside space worthy of any note... and the Council said, "Ok, they're looking for this [outside space]," but it was a bit of 'Well if they're getting that, then our school over here has to get the same.' Now you have two, one that is PEACE funded and one that is Council funded. (Interview 1)

This example demonstrates how PEACE funding is used at the local level to maintain an ethnopolitical carve up.

The operationalization of the program spoke to similar issues, particularly the implementation of the 50-40-10 (Protestant, Catholic, BME) participant ratios, where the PEACE IV program was seen as contentious, contrived, and difficult to deliver in practice. While the underpinning logic for why this criterion was included was not questioned by the interviewees, there was universal agreement that this had not been helpful in achieving desired outcomes. The experiences outlined below is typical of our interviewees:

I organised a soccer program which, if I was going to tick our 50-40-10 requirement needed more from the BME community. When I handed out the forms, the guy actually said to me "Why, am I called an ethnic minority?"... I had no answer. (Interview 14)

These comments were typical of the way the crude criteria of 50-40-10 and contact theory, which underpins the rationale for PEACE IV, manifested themselves in the everyday delivery of projects. While many interviewees saw the value of participant ratios in theory, the various practical challenges they posed to project delivery consistently outweighed any benefit.

The types of projects that worked well in ABC were the projects with a strong community planning element, with active collaboration between council officers and other project partners in understanding and defining the nature of the local policy problem being addressed. These projects enhanced the relationship between the Council and external partners and developed the administrative capacity of officers. Council officers would liaise with NGOs and community groups, identifying common needs and chairing project working groups that identified niche, local interventions that would have maximum impact (Knox & McCrory, 2018). This model of working has generated a highly motivated and competent number of officers involved with PEACE IV, demonstrating that the funding has been effective in developing the capacity of officers and their relationships with local social partners.

Our research identified a degree of tension between the types of policies being funded by PEACE IV program and what local policy entrepreneurs had identified as potential policy priorities for peace work in the area. In particular, the preconditions set by SEUPB for how these activities were to be conducted in relation to participant ratios and contact hours curtailed the opportunities for workable "off the shelf" projects known to the Council. Partly, this was due to the overall structure of the funding program, which identified all funded activities as part of the "peace" program, setting them apart from run-of-the-mill community development projects.

Our interviewees highlighted the need for "off the shelf" policies that respond to the needs of conflict management, which are internally determined rather than externally, and that respond to collectively defined common needs in the area, rather than tailored policies tagged

with the label “peace” and targeting particular community backgrounds. International funders, by supporting the local development of policies, with international mentoring, can support the development of locally relevant policy interventions.

## 8 | CONCLUSIONS

The lessons from EU PEACE IV funding in NI have implications not only for future funding rounds, but for external funding efforts to fashion policy change more generally: policymakers must consider designing social transformation funding cognisant that alternative sources of funding are available to local politicians and can be used to give the illusion of shared space and service delivery. When viewed through the prism of Matland's framework, the EU may inadvertently be supporting politicians with a populist agenda, whose interests are best served by securing services for *their* ethnopolitical community. While these geographic areas need funding, if international funders are to successfully influence sustained domestic policy change through the implementation of externally funded programs such as PEACE, local actors need to generate context-relevant policy innovations. A penchant for crude quantitative metrics that accords primacy to narrow accounting measures to ensure financial accountability risks trumping other considerations including, crucially, the impact in terms of changing attitudes and outcomes “on the ground.” Bluntly, in other words, bums on seats and crude sectarian head counting alone is a poor measure of success. Finally, rather than isolating PEACE funding into its own silo, objectives, and success criteria (such as 50-40-10 participant ratios), our findings highlight the merit of investing in developing local institutional administrative capacity to continue with this work across, and in between, the waves of external funding, if the mistakes of earlier iterations of PEACE are not to be repeated.

Using Matland's (1995) framework, we have demonstrated why aspects of the implementation of the EU PEACE program remains ineffective despite conducive circumstances, leading to an implementation deficit. Any full account of the outcomes of PEACE would need to engage with the complex legacies and micropolitics of the Troubles and the peace process, far beyond the scope of this article. The tensions associated with the high levels of local political conflict and low tolerance for ambiguity in the design of the policy program help us understand the findings of our study and explain the limited impact of EU PEACE funding to date. Rather than funding a lasting peace in NI, PEACE funding has sustained the status quo between the two traditional communities. While an absence of violent conflict has been recognized across NI, insidious community segregation continues.

At the same time, as the local administrators adhere to the strict rules of the policy, these policies are at odds with local political interests and priorities, leading to an implementation deficit. Ultimately, what is at stake is the incongruence of the short-term goals of EU implementation of the PEACE IV program against the short-term goals of the local politicians representing the two ethnopolitical constituencies. Those seeking to support the conflict management-conflict resolution process, need to draw on policy implementation research from societies where the local administrations are hostile or have alternative aims to the national or supranational administration. An alternative to the “one for me, and one for you carve up” approach implicit in the current EU PEACE programs is to identify social issues which impact adversely on both communities (educational under-achievement, poor labor force skills, inadequate health care) and adopt a common needs approach. Funding is directed at those wicked public policy issues in areas of highest social need and provided collectively, ignoring

community divisions. Cross-community contacts, therefore, take place around common social issues, and artificial head counting (such as 50-40-10) become redundant. Better community relations evolve organically rather than in a contrived and superficial way which exacerbates segregation. What this research highlights is the role played by administrative ambiguity in policy contexts characterized by complexity and entrenched political conflict. The key to successful policy implementation is more likely to be found in administrative capacity and in highly-skilled bureaucrats with the professional autonomy, experience, and expertise to negotiate locally relevant and appropriate implementation mechanisms.

Further research on this topic could be expanded in several directions, drawing on the three themes identified in the introduction to this research. First, implementing public policy through multilevel governance arrangements such as the PEACE program provides a greater propensity for a gap between policy objectives and outcomes. This demands a better conceptualization of policy implementation processes. Revisiting the seminal work of Matland in this regard offers a rich vein of future research. Second, the contact theory of peacebuilding that has been in place for many years and across different conflict settings demands more rigorous investigation. Its simplicity of matching participants from “both sides of the divide” for sustained periods of contact has intuitive appeal for funders who can devise corresponding metrics. The limitations of, and substitute for, this approach is worthy of attention—the common needs model identified above. Finally, the role of EU and EU policies within the peace process in NI has been very well-intentioned but ultimately driven by the fiduciary concerns of member states to account for large amounts of grant aid. Vesting responsibility for implementation in the hands of those whose *raison d'être* is to protect their own ethnopolitical base demands further scrutiny.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflicts of interest

## ORCID

Colin Knox  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4635-1204>

Karl O'Connor  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5098-5141>

Markus Ketola  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2958-6255>

Paul Carmichael  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5559-641X>

## ENDNOTE

- <sup>1</sup> The research project has been approved the Ethics Committee of the School of Applied Social and Policy Sciences at Ulster University.

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## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

**Colin Knox** is Professor of Public Policy in the Graduate School of Public Policy at Nazarbayev University, Kazakhstan, and Professor Emeritus of Comparative Public Policy at Ulster University, UK. His recent research focuses on political patronage, entitled *Political Patronage in Asian Bureaucracies* B. G. Peters, C. Knox, and B. S. Kim eds. (Cambridge University Press, 2023).

**Karl O'Connor** is Professor of Public Administration and Policy within the Centre for Public Administration at Ulster University. He is also the Research Director for the School of Applied Social and Policy Sciences. His research focuses on public administration within multiethnic societies. His current research examines public administration in the Middle East, Central Asia, and NI.

**Markus Ketola** is Senior Lecturer in Global and International Social Policy at the University of Edinburgh. His research interests include the role of civil society organizations in the design and delivery of public services in NI, Turkey, and Europe. His publications in this area include *Europeanization and Civil Society* (Palgrave, 2013) and (with Ciaran Hughes) *Neoliberalism and the Voluntary and Community Sector in NI* (Policy Press, 2021).

**Paul Carmichael** is Professor of Public Policy and Government and Director designate of the Centre for Public Administration at Ulster University, UK. His current research focuses on devolution in the UK, local government in NI, and aspects of the relationships between NI, Ireland, Great Britain, and other countries in the aftermath of the UK's secession from the European Union.

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