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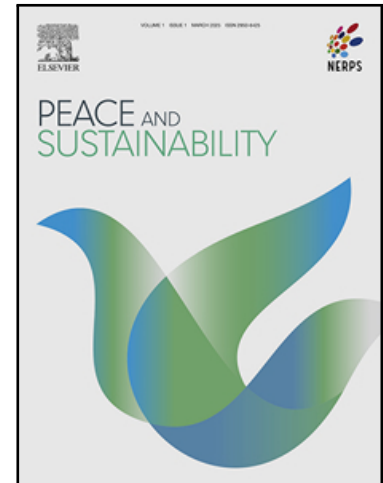
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Governing Reconciliation: Metagovernance, Alignment, and Sustainable Peace in Northern Ireland

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Title

Governing Reconciliation: Metagovernance, Alignment, and Sustainable Peace in Northern Ireland

Running title

Governing Reconciliation

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Abstract

Peace can endure institutionally while remaining socially and politically fragile. This article asks what forms of alignment post-agreement governance in Northern Ireland has produced, around which policy objects, and why these have remained insufficiently connected around reconciliation as a durable and actionable objective. Drawing on archival and documentary research and thirty-one semi-structured interviews with governmental, political, European Union and civil-society actors, it examines reconciliation not as an assumed outcome of a peace settlement, but as a policy object that must be defined, institutionalised and connected across governance domains. Bringing technocratic peacebuilding into dialogue with metagovernance, the article conceptualises metagovernance as the strategic organisation of alignment around policy objects and distinguishes alignment from coordination. It identifies three empirical configurations. The constitutional settlement generated procedural alignment around political stability, institutional continuity and the management of disagreement. EU-supported programmes produced programmatic alignment around participation, funding and project delivery. Civil-society practice generated relational alignment around coexistence, cooperation and social repair. These forms of alignment have sustained political interaction, organised resources and enabled locally grounded reconciliation, but they remain differentiated by object, scale, depth and duration. The central problem is therefore not an absence of alignment, but that these partial achievements have not developed cumulatively around reconciliation as a shared, cross-domain orientation. The article shows that technocratic peacebuilding is both productive and strategically selective: it can generate significant governance capacities while privileging some policy objects over others. Sustainable peace consequently depends not only on institutional survival, but also on whether the arrangements that maintain stability are connected to processes of social repair and relational transformation.

Keywords: Sustainable peace; Reconciliation; Metagovernance; Alignment; Technocratic peacebuilding; Northern Ireland; Post-conflict governance

1. Introduction

Since the 1998 Belfast/Good Friday Agreement (B/GFA), Northern Ireland has achieved substantial political stability. Large-scale political violence has largely ceased, yet societal division persists and reconciliation remains uneven, fragmented and selectively institutionalised [1–3].¹ Recent anti-immigrant disorder in Belfast underscores the contemporary significance of this gap [4]. This should not be read as a simple return to the past, but as evidence that procedurally stable peace can remain vulnerable when institutional durability is not matched by deeper reconciliation, social integration, and mechanisms capable of addressing new forms of exclusion [5].

For the study of sustainable peace and the wider peace–sustainability nexus, this disjuncture matters because the absence of renewed large-scale violence does not by itself demonstrate the sustainability of peace [6]. Here, sustainability refers to the capacity of a post-conflict order to endure socially and institutionally over time, beyond the mere absence of large-scale violence. It includes the ability to sustain non-violent relations, manage old and new divisions, and

¹ Reconciliation in Northern Ireland has been extensively examined in the scholarly literature and continues to attract policy attention. In April 2026, the UK Parliament’s Northern Ireland Affairs Committee launched an inquiry into societal reconciliation, including questions of definition, political will, funding, acknowledgement of past harms, the impact of social inequalities and identity markers, the adequacy of the UK Government’s approach under the Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Act 2023, and coordination between the UK Government, the Northern Ireland Executive, and the Irish Government. See Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, ‘New inquiry: MPs to examine reconciliation in Northern Ireland’, UK Parliament, 20 April 2026, <https://committees.parliament.uk/committee/120/northern-ireland-affairs-committee/news/213222/new-inquiry-mps-to-examine-reconciliation-in-northern-ireland/> (accessed 29 June 2026).

connect institutional stability to processes of social repair and reconciliation. This, in turn, raises a central question: why do post-conflict arrangements that successfully stabilise conflict fail to generate integrative outcomes such as reconciliation?

Peacebuilding scholarship has offered several explanations for this problem, moving beyond accounts centred solely on insufficient goodwill, unfinished social healing or antagonistic identities [7–9]. Reconciliation has been commonly understood as a moral, relational, and societal process [10,5], yet also organised through institutions, public programmes, funding regimes, administrative categories and civil-society practices [10,5,11].

The conditions under which reconciliation becomes governable, however, have received comparatively less attention [12]. Addressing this gap requires approaching it not simply as an aspiration appended to peace, but as a policy object: a policy-relevant construct around which governance efforts are organised through problem definition, objectives, responsibilities and evaluative criteria. In fragmented settings, such objects must be constituted and stabilised across domains rather than assumed. Where this does not occur, coordination may still generate partial forms of alignment around procedures, programmes or local practices, without consolidating a sufficiently shared understanding of reconciliation's purpose or connecting these forms of activity across governance domains.

The article therefore draws on debates on technocratic peacebuilding [13–16]. This scholarship highlights how post-conflict orders translate contested political and social questions into manageable repertoires of planning, delivery, monitoring and institutional maintenance [17]. Peace may thereby be stabilised as an administrative achievement without necessarily becoming a transformative project [14]. Such arrangements may organise activity effectively [17], while leaving reconciliation dispersed across differently motivated and weakly connected initiatives [18,19].

Coordination refers here to the organisation of interaction among actors, institutions and programmes, whereas alignment concerns the extent to which that interaction is oriented towards a sufficiently shared and operational policy object [20]. Alignment does not require consensus, institutional integration or identical motivations, but a joint direction of action around defined purposes, responsibilities, and criteria of progress [13]. This distinction shifts attention beyond coordination to how contested objectives are constituted, stabilised and connected (or left disconnected) across fragmented institutional, political and societal arenas.

Against this backdrop, the article asks: what forms of alignment are produced within post-agreement governance in Northern Ireland, around which objects, and why have they remained insufficiently connected around reconciliation as a durable and actionable policy objective?

The argument draws on archival and documentary research and semi-structured interviews [21]. It shows that the Northern Ireland peace process, widely regarded as a comparatively successful case [22], has generated significant but partial forms of alignment. The constitutional architecture produced institutional and procedural alignment around political stability and the management of disagreement. European Union (EU) supported interventions generated externally mediated and programmatic alignment around participation, funding and project delivery. Civil-society practice produced relational but locally bounded alignment around coexistence and practical cooperation [22]. Yet they have remained differentiated by object, scale and duration, and have not been connected around reconciliation as a durable, cross-domain policy orientation.

To explain this pattern, the article brings scholarship on technocratic peacebuilding into dialogue with *metagovernance* [23,20,24]. Technocratic peacebuilding draws attention to the administrative rationalities through which contested political and social questions are translated into manageable forms of interaction [14,16]. Metagovernance, reconceptualised here as the strategic organisation of alignment around a policy object across governance domains, provides

a framework for analysing how technocratic instruments orient interaction towards particular objectives.

The article therefore refines prevailing accounts of technocratic peacebuilding by demonstrating that its limitations lie not only in the privileging of procedure over transformation, but also in the objects around which procedures, resources and institutional responsibilities are organised. Technocratic peacebuilding does not merely constrain or obstruct reconciliation, but is strategically selective [25]: it privileges particular policy objects, actors and forms of coordination, producing concrete governance achievements without necessarily connecting them to relational transformation.

It also advances metagovernance theory by showing that steering arrangements do not simply coordinate networks [26], but help constitute and prioritise the policy objects around which different forms of alignment develop. Metagovernance is thus treated not only as the management of interdependence, but as a peacebuilding practice through which the direction, depth and the institutional reach of coordination are strategically shaped.

The article proceeds as follows. Section two sets out the research design and methods. Section three develops the theoretical framework of metagovernance and situates it within debates on technocratic peacebuilding. The subsequent sections examine the governance of reconciliation across three key arenas: the constitutional settlement, supranational interventions and civil society. A further section then examines successive domestic attempts to institutionalise reconciliation through good-relations and legacy policy, asking whether these interventions generated more durable cross-domain alignment. The final section reflects on the implications for peacebuilding and sustainable peace.

2. Research Design and Methods

This article adopts a qualitative, multi-source research design [21]. Northern Ireland constitutes an analytically revealing case because it combines a dense and comparatively durable institutional architecture with extensive external intervention and sustained civil-society activity, despite the uneven institutionalisation of reconciliation.

The analysis draws on primary archival and documentary materials, interview evidence and relevant secondary scholarship. First, archival and documentary research was undertaken at the National Archives of the United Kingdom (UK), the National Archives of Ireland, the Historical Archives of the European Parliament, and the University of Galway Library.² These materials were examined to reconstruct the emergence and development of reconciliation as a political and administrative objective, including the institutional arrangements, funding and policy frameworks through which it was pursued before and after the 1998 B/GFA. The archival record was particularly important for tracing the formal architecture of the peace process and identifying how reconciliation was historically articulated, operationalised or displaced within successive institutional arrangements.

Second, thirty-one semi-structured interviews were conducted with governmental, political, EU-level and civil-society actors between March 2024 and August 2025. Participants were initially recruited through purposive sampling to include actors with direct knowledge of reconciliation policy and practice across different governance levels. Snowball sampling was subsequently used to identify additional participants with relevant institutional, political or community experience. Interviewees included former and serving British, Northern Irish and Irish officials; political actors; representatives involved in European funding and programme

² The University of Galway Library is particularly relevant because it holds the Hugh Logue Papers. Logue, a former European Commission official and special adviser to the 1994 Delors Task Force, was one of three advisers asked to consult political and societal actors in Northern Ireland. Their recommendations provided the blueprint for the first EU PEACE Programme. See University of Galway Archives, 'Hugh Logue Papers', <https://archivesearch.library.universityofgalway.ie/index.php/hugh-logue-papers> (accessed 28 July 2026).

administration; civil-society leaders; community practitioners; and individuals with experience of cross-community and former-combatant initiatives. Interviews were conducted both in person and online and are listed by anonymised role and date in Table S1 of the Supplementary Material.

The interviews were recorded with participants' consent and transcribed before being analysed thematically, following the broad stages proposed by Nowell et al. [27]. Analysis began with repeated reading of the complete set of transcripts to develop familiarity with both recurring patterns and differences among participants' accounts. Relevant segments were then coded according to their relationship to the research question. Initial codes addressed institutional responsibility, supranational intervention, funding, local relationship-building and connections between grassroots practice and public policy. These codes were progressively compared, grouped and refined into broader themes. The themes were reviewed against the complete dataset to ensure internal coherence while preserving divergent or qualifying perspectives.

At a further interpretive stage, these themes were brought into dialogue with the article's metagovernance framework. Each governance domain was examined in relation to the object around which interaction was organised, the mechanisms through which coordination was produced, the depth and scale of the resulting alignment and the extent to which it was connected to other domains. This process informed the identification of the three empirical configurations developed in the empirical sections. They were developed iteratively through engagement between the empirical material and the conceptual distinction between coordination and alignment, rather than imposed in advance.

All interviews formed part of this interpretive analysis. The quotations presented in the article were selected because they either articulated recurring patterns particularly clearly, qualified

those patterns, or offered contrasting perspectives on them. Quotation frequency should therefore not be treated as a measure of an interview's analytical importance.

Finally, triangulation lies at the methodological centre of the study [28]. Archival sources illuminate the administrative infrastructure of peacebuilding but often under-represent informal practices, discretion, grassroots activity and exchanges that were not formally recorded. Interviews illuminate how actors interpreted institutional constraints, how routines developed in practice and how informal relationships operated alongside formal structures. Published policy materials supplemented the archival and interview evidence, while secondary scholarship was used to contextualise the findings and locate them within existing debates on reconciliation, technocratic peacebuilding, public administration and metagovernance. Systematically cross-referencing these sources allows each to qualify and test the other.

Taken together, this triangulated approach allows reconciliation policy and practice to be reconstructed not as a linear or mechanistic process, but as contingent, interpretive and shaped by institutional fragmentation, political disagreement and uncertainty.

3. From Coordination to Alignment: Technocratic Peacebuilding and Metagovernance

Critics of technocratic peacebuilding have portrayed it as a form of governance that increasingly resembles administrative routine rather than integrative transformation [14]. Technocratic systems can indeed become absorbed in the maintenance of their own procedures, reproducing established routines rather than adapting to complex and changing local conditions [17]. Such forms of 'closed-loop thinking' [14] privilege administratively legible problems and familiar instruments while constraining reflection, institutional learning and strategic adjustment.

Moreover, hierarchical and departmentalised structures frequently reinforce these tendencies by relying on linear models of planning, fixed objectives and externally generated knowledge, even where the meanings and purposes of peacebuilding remain politically contested [29]. The result may be competing interpretations of policy aims, limited adaptation, and the privileging of procedural compliance over integrative outcomes [30]. Viewed from this perspective, technocracy appears poorly equipped to foster the relational depth, social transformation, and cross-domain coherence associated with sustainable peace and reconciliation [31].

A more recent strand of scholarship has, however, challenged an exclusively negative reading of technocracy [32–36,16]. It regards technocratic governance as imperfect but often necessary, suggesting that its underlying commitments to efficiency, neutrality and standardisation (however questionable in other respects) can perform important functions in deeply divided societies [16,34]. Administrative routines can maintain channels of communication, stabilise expectations, distribute responsibilities, protect agreed procedures and sustain governance despite the absence of political consensus [32]. Rather than simply depoliticising conflict, bureaucratic structures may transform the conditions under which disagreement is managed by making interaction recurrent, predictable and institutionally protected [37].

Sectoral and template-driven interventions may also create spaces beyond conventional state-centred structures, enabling civil-society and grassroots actors to participate in bottom-up peacebuilding initiatives [38,39,36,24]. Scholarship on Northern Ireland has gone further, interpreting the institutional architecture established in 1998 as a system of sustained interaction: one designed to keep actors engaged, preserve institutional processes and manage disagreement without requiring convergence around fundamental political questions [13].

Yet the productive features of these arrangements are inseparable from their limitations. The same structures may generate overlapping programmes, dispersed responsibilities and parallel systems of implementation [24,29]. The resulting problem is therefore not an absence of

governance, but a proliferation of coordination that is procedurally dense yet weakly connected across political, administrative and societal domains.

This distinction is central to debates on sustainable peace because governance density should not be mistaken for governance capacity [40]. The multiplication of institutions, programmes and partnerships may sustain order, capacity and continuity without creating the conditions through which peace and reconciliation can be embedded over time. The analytical task is therefore to establish not simply whether technocratic governance generates interaction, but what that interaction is organised around, how it is steered, and whether the resulting forms of coordination are connected to a sufficiently shared and operational understanding of reconciliation.

The difficulty is that the analytical frameworks most commonly used to study post-conflict governance are better equipped to map interaction than to explain its direction. Governance approaches illuminate institutional arrangements and modes of coordination [38,41,42]. Multi-level governance theory captures the distribution of authority across territorial scales [43]. Network approaches reveal patterns of interdependence among public and societal actors [44,45]. These perspectives say less about how interaction is steered across domains, how particular objectives acquire institutional force, and why extensive coordination may nevertheless fail to produce a shared direction of action.

Metagovernance addresses this problem by shifting attention from the existence of governance arrangements to the actors and practices through which the conditions of interaction are strategically shaped [46]. It is not an impersonal coordinating force, nor does it necessarily reside in a single institutional centre. Rather, it is exercised by multiple actors who possess differing degrees of authority, resources, and capacity to influence how interdependence is organised [47,48].

In peacebuilding contexts, these metagovernors may include public officials, administrative intermediaries, EU programme officials and coordinators, and civil-society actors who assume roles in framing problems, connecting arenas and shaping implementation [36]. They become metagovernors insofar as they design institutional settings, allocate responsibilities and resources, establish incentives and procedural rules, and define the terms through which participation and progress are understood [49].

The exercise of metagovernance is therefore plural and distributed: different metagovernors may operate simultaneously across constitutional, administrative, supranational and societal domains, sometimes reinforcing one another and sometimes pursuing competing objectives [20]. Rather than replacing decentralised governance, their interventions seek to order, connect and steer the forms of interdependence it produces, shaping the environment within which actors interpret problems, mobilise resources and pursue particular courses of action [26].

Building on this understanding, the article conceptualises metagovernance not simply as the coordination of governance networks, but as the strategic organisation of alignment around a policy object across governance domains. The focus consequently shifts from whether actors, institutions and programmes interact to who seeks to orient that interaction, through which instruments, and around which objectives. This perspective makes it possible to examine how the practices of multiple metagovernors give some problems and objectives institutional definition, resources and durability, while leaving others ambiguous, dispersed or peripheral.

Metagovernors do not merely steer interaction towards objectives that already exist. Through, for example, problem definition, institutional design, resource allocation and the establishment of evaluative criteria, they participate in constituting those objectives as policy objects [47,48]. This process is necessarily selective. Decisions about what constitutes a problem, which dimensions merit intervention, who possesses relevant knowledge, and what counts as progress give unequal institutional force to different actors, strategies, interpretations and time horizons.

Strategic selectivity captures this constitutive feature of metagovernance [25]. Governance arrangements do not simply provide neutral arenas in which actors interact on equal terms. They structure who can participate effectively, which interests are rendered institutionally legible, which strategies become viable and which objectives acquire administrative authority. These effects need not result from deliberate exclusion. They may arise from apparently neutral procedures, professional norms, funding requirements or indicators that advantage actors already equipped to operate within them. Strategic selectivity is therefore not an aberration that can be removed from metagovernance, but a constitutive feature that must be rendered visible, contested and, where necessary, revised.

This is especially important in relation to reconciliation, which is not a pre-existing or self-evident objective awaiting implementation [7,9]. Its meaning is constituted through decisions about what counts as a reconciliation problem, which aspects receive political and administrative attention, where responsibility is located, which actors are authorised to speak and which activities or indicators are recognised as evidence of progress. Technocratic metagovernance therefore does not simply implement reconciliation after its meaning has been settled. It helps determine which understanding of reconciliation becomes governable and which dimensions remain marginal, dispersed or institutionally unsupported.

A final distinction is necessary. Alignment differs from coordination, which concerns the organisation of interaction [25]. It is also different from policy coherence, which concerns the compatibility of policies and objectives [50]; policy integration, which combines objectives, instruments or institutional arrangements across sectors or levels [51]; and mainstreaming, which embeds an objective within routine policy processes [50]. Alignment instead refers to the extent to which differentiated actors and arenas are oriented towards a sufficiently defined and operational policy object. It does not require consensus, institutional integration or convergence of political goals and may vary in its object, depth, scale and duration.

This distinction is especially important in deeply divided societies, where political representatives, public officials and grassroots actors may participate in common arrangements while retaining incompatible constitutional projects, institutional loyalties and understandings of peace [52,38,11]. Coordination may stabilise interaction without resolving disagreement. The question is whether such interaction remains organised principally around the management of conflict or becomes connected to reconciliation as a broader, more substantive and durable policy orientation. This is what will be explored in the next sections.

4. Institutionalising Managed Disagreement: Procedural Alignment after 1998

Northern Ireland emerged in 1921 as a deeply divided political space structured around competing constitutional aspirations: unionists sought to remain within the UK, while nationalists pursued Irish unification [53]. These divisions constrained the development of a shared political arena and became embedded within both institutions and society. This historical inheritance is central to understanding the governance of peace in Northern Ireland, which has repeatedly required interaction to be organised among actors who disagree not only about policy, but also about the boundaries and constitutional identity of the political community itself [19].

Northern Ireland's constitutional development is therefore better understood not as a linear progression towards conflict resolution, but as the gradual institutionalisation of mechanisms through which political interaction could continue in the absence of agreement. The 1985 Anglo-Irish Agreement (AIA) marked an important stage by establishing a structured pattern of British–Irish cooperation despite continuing disagreement over sovereignty [54]. Although it did not resolve the constitutional conflict, it created recurring practices of engagement and articulated a shared language of reconciliation and inclusion [19]. Its predominantly intergovernmental design nevertheless left Northern Ireland's political actors largely outside

the institutional process, strengthening coordination between the two governments without producing broader political alignment around reconciliation.³

The 1994 Forum for Peace and Reconciliation represented a more direct attempt to place reconciliation within the developing peace process. Established by the Irish Government following the Downing Street Declaration (DSD) [55] and the paramilitary ceasefires,⁴ it provided an arena in which political parties could discuss trust, cooperation and future relationships on the island. Its reach remained limited: nationalist and centrist parties participated, but unionist parties remained outside the process and the British Government did not assume a corresponding role [56]. The Forum therefore enabled reconciliation to be articulated and debated [57], but could not orient interaction across the principal political and intergovernmental arenas.⁵

The AIA and the Forum established important practices of coordination before 1998, but their institutional reach remained partial.⁶ Neither connected the forms of interaction it produced around reconciliation as a sufficiently shared and operational policy object. The challenge confronting the subsequent peace settlement was therefore not simply to bring divided actors into contact, but to construct an institutional architecture capable of sustaining their interaction despite continuing constitutional disagreement.

³ The National Archives (TNA), Kew, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), FCO 87/2421, 'History of the Anglo-Irish Agreement: An Account of the Negotiations', 1 January 1987 – 31 December 1987; National Archives of Ireland (NAI), Dublin, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), 2015/51/1557, 'Anglo Irish Agreement 1985', 1 January 1985 – 31 December 1985; TNA, Kew, Cabinet Office (CAB), CJ 4/10257, 'Developments Affecting Anglo-Irish Relations', 25 February 1985.

⁴ TNA, Kew, Cabinet Office (CAB), CJ 4/11944, 'Forum for Peace and Reconciliation, Republic of Ireland', October 1994 – December 1995; NAI, DFAT, DFA/12/876, 'National Forum for Peace and Reconciliation; Development of Disadvantaged Areas', October 1994 – December 1995.

⁵ NAI, DFA/12/876.

⁶ TNA, Kew, Cabinet Office (CAB), CJ 4/11944, 'Forum for Peace and Reconciliation, Republic of Ireland', October 1994 – December 1995.

The negotiations culminating in the 1998 B/GFA sought to address this challenge. The talks process - a sequence of dialogue, negotiation and compromise initiated in the early 1990s and developed through the multi-party negotiations convened in 1996 [58] - brought previously excluded actors into a structured framework of engagement, including parties associated with paramilitary organisations. Rather than seeking to eliminate political difference, the talks sought to make continued interaction possible through institutional design [1]. Their three interlocking strands, subsequently embedded in the B/GFA, organised governance within Northern Ireland, cooperation across the island of Ireland, and relations between the British and Irish governments [59]. The resulting settlement institutionalised an ongoing process of political accommodation across overlapping arenas of authority, establishing rules and procedures through which disagreement could be managed without requiring convergence around a common conception of the political community.

The central policy object embedded in this architecture was therefore not reconciliation in a comprehensive or transformative sense, but political stability through the managed accommodation of constitutional disagreement. The Agreement was a peace accord intended to ‘end violence, secure political legitimacy and establish new relationships among competing national traditions’ [60]. Yet reconciliation occupied only a limited place within its formal provisions [61]. Its institutional machinery was organised more precisely around participation, consent, inclusion, procedural continuity and the prevention of unilateral domination. Power-sharing, cross-community voting, proportional allocation and the dual leadership of the Executive obliged political actors to govern together without requiring agreement on Northern Ireland’s ultimate constitutional future [1,19,59,62].

This governing logic is reflected in how some of those involved in the negotiations understood reconciliation. As one interviewee observed:

‘I think I might have been too depressed to go to work if I had regarded achieving reconciliation between the two communities as my major goal. [...] I’d say [reconciliation] is an accumulation of little things. [...] My feeling is that reconciliation is a welcome by-product of doing the right things all the time. But, you know, if you set out to achieve reconciliation, you’d probably fail.’ [63]

Reconciliation was thus understood less as a discrete and operational policy objective than as an anticipated consequence of sustained institutional practice. The immediate task was to keep actors engaged, preserve agreed procedures, and allow public authority to function despite continuing disagreement. Repeated interaction might gradually alter relationships, but the architecture was designed principally to stabilise political engagement rather than prescribe its transformative destination. The settlement thereby institutionalised coordination without requiring convergence.

The institutional framework was politically authorised by the British and Irish governments and agreed by party leaders, but the environment within which political decisions were made was shaped and maintained principally by senior public officials and institutional intermediaries. During the negotiations, British and Irish civil servants helped structure agendas, sequence discussions, formulate options and maintain channels among actors who could not always engage directly. The settlement’s subsequent operation depended on Northern Ireland Office (NIO), Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS) and intergovernmental officials, together with other intermediaries who prepared decisions, interpreted procedures, preserved institutional memory and repaired working relationships during periods of strain [64]. Party leaders remained the principal political decision-makers, but acted within, and sometimes contested, an environment continually shaped by these metagovernors.

Metagovernance was exercised through both formal and informal instruments [48]. The formal architecture included the features already described. Equally important were the administrative routines supporting them: the preparation and sequencing of meetings, informal

communication, negotiated adjustments, procedural interpretation and institutional memory [65,66]. Within statutory frameworks and under ministerial authority, civil servants performed roles extending beyond implementation by mediating tensions, maintaining communication and facilitating compromises that could not be secured through hierarchical command alone [13].

The Agreement also attempted to extend participation beyond governmental institutions and established political parties. The Northern Ireland Civic Forum [67] was conceived as a consultative arena through which civil-society representatives could contribute to debate on social, economic and cultural matters, while the wider rights and equality architecture created additional channels for interests not fully represented through party politics [68]. These arrangements potentially allowed a broader range of actors to inform the metagovernance of the settlement and connected constitutional governance to societal knowledge and experience. Their position was nevertheless considerably weaker than that of the core power-sharing structures. The Civic Forum's limited operation and subsequent disappearance illustrate the uneven durability of the Agreement's participatory instruments: civil-society consultation was formally recognised, but not protected or embedded with the same force as intergovernmental cooperation and elite political accommodation.

The architecture's strength lay in its capacity to make interaction recurrent, predictable and institutionally protected [37]. Simultaneously, its vulnerabilities were rooted in this design. Because cooperation depended on the continued participation of autonomous actors with incompatible objectives, disputes over decommissioning, institutional authority and political legitimacy repeatedly threatened the settlement's operation. The 'habit of talking' [13] did not guarantee effective decision-making, but recurrent crises also generated practices of adaptation, repair and restoration that strengthened the procedural architecture over time.

The B/GFA therefore produced more than a set of coordinating institutions. It generated a durable, although repeatedly tested, form of procedural alignment around participation, institutional continuity and the management of disagreement. Its strategic selectivity lay in the priority accorded to stability, elite accommodation and the preservation of political institutions. Reconciliation remained present as an expectation and possible consequence of institutional cooperation, but was less clearly defined, less firmly assigned within policymaking structures and less securely embedded as a cross-domain policy object.

5. Programming Peace: EU Metagovernance and Programmatic Alignment

Although reconciliation was not systematically embedded within the constitutional settlement, it did not disappear from the peace process. It was increasingly pursued through alternative arenas, particularly externally supported initiatives. The EU became especially significant in this respect. Unlike the constitutional architecture examined above, European intervention introduced a distinct mode of coordination organised through regional policy, financial incentives and technocratic programmes [69].

The foundations of this involvement preceded the signing of the B/GFA. European regional policy encouraged cross-border cooperation by supporting initiatives intended to identify shared interests and generate positive-sum forms of interaction across the island [70]. This approach was particularly attractive to nationalist actors seeking to develop cooperation across the border [49]. Many unionist actors remained more cautious, fearing that European involvement might strengthen cross-border links and encourage political rapprochement with the Republic of Ireland [71].

Programmes such as INTERREG nevertheless provided financial incentives and an institutional model intended to transform borders from barriers into bridges [72]. INTERREG

was not designed as a peacebuilding programme, however, and its capacity to address the conflict directly remained limited [49]. The paramilitary ceasefires created an opportunity for a more purposeful European intervention.

The EU Programme for Peace and Reconciliation in Northern Ireland and the Border Counties of Ireland [73] - commonly known as PEACE - became the principal European instrument through which support for peace and reconciliation was organised [74]. Developed following extensive consultations conducted by an EU Task Force across Northern Ireland and the border regions,⁷ the programme sought to combine socio-economic regeneration with cross-community and cross-border engagement [36]. It thereby extended EU involvement into the local and societal arenas of peacebuilding.

The governance architecture of PEACE reflected this broader ambition [73]. Jointly supported by the EU, the UK and Ireland, the programme connected supranational, national, regional and local actors through dedicated administrative arrangements [75,76]. Successive iterations - now continued through PEACEPLUS - developed an increasingly administrative structure connecting European priorities to local implementation. Programme administrators and intermediary organisations connected European objectives to local needs, while participating organisations translated broad priorities into activities adapted to particular communities and places [77].

⁷ University of Galway Library Archives, Galway, NI 08/96, 'European Commission Office in Northern Ireland Weekly Press Review', 11 December 1994 (including consultation materials such as the report of the Community Foundation for Northern Ireland); Historical Archives of the European Parliament (HAEP), A4-0068/95, 'Report on the Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament on a Special Support Programme for Peace and Reconciliation in Northern Ireland (COM(94)0607—C4-0267/94) and on the Draft Notice to the Member States Laying Down Guidelines for an Initiative in the Framework of the Special Support Programme for Peace and Reconciliation in Northern Ireland and the Border Counties of Ireland (SEC(95)0279—C4-0084/95)', 24 March 1995.

Coordination within this arena did not depend on prior political agreement about the meaning of reconciliation [78]. It was produced administratively through a shared framework governing access to resources, participation and implementation [29]. Actors with different motivations and understandings of peace could therefore participate within a common operational framework. The significance of PEACE lay not only in the resources it provided, but also in its capacity to organise participation and cooperation through a shared programme architecture.

The European Commission consequently became the principal metagovernor of this programme-based arena of bottom-up peacebuilding. It did not direct local activity through hierarchical command. Rather, it shaped the environment within which peacebuilding could occur by defining programme priorities, funding rules, partnership expectations and evaluative criteria [79]. The UK and Irish governments participated in programme governance and provided matching resources, while bodies such as the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB) translated European priorities into calls, selection procedures and implementation arrangements [80]. Local organisations retained discretion over their activities, but exercised that agency within an externally constructed framework of opportunities, incentives and constraints [78].

From PEACE II onwards, this framework also provided what was arguably the most explicit operational definition of reconciliation adopted within the Northern Ireland peace process [81]. Reconciliation was defined through five interrelated dimensions: developing a shared vision of an interdependent and equitable society; acknowledging and addressing the past; building positive relationships; achieving cultural and attitudinal change; and transforming the social, economic and political structures associated with conflict [82]. Whereas reconciliation had remained weakly specified within the constitutional settlement, the PEACE framework articulated its substantive components and translated them into a recognisable field of intervention.

Defining reconciliation did not, however, automatically align participating actors around a common understanding of its purposes. Through the programme architecture, a broad and transformative conception was translated into technocratic criteria [24]. Participation did not require substantive political agreement among beneficiaries. Organisations with differing motivations and conceptions of peace could align around the requirements of a common programme, provided that they framed their activities in institutionally legible terms [83]. The result was programmatic alignment: interaction was organised around access to resources, partnership and project delivery rather than around a politically negotiated conception of reconciliation.

This arrangement produced important achievements. PEACE created material and institutional opportunities for cross-community and cross-border initiatives, enabled forms of cooperation beyond established political structures and gave symbolic recognition to work that had previously remained marginal. European support also helped make reconciliation governable by identifying fields of activity, allocating resources and enabling local actors to translate broad ambitions into practical initiatives [19]. The programme thereby partly compensated for the limited institutionalisation of reconciliation within the constitutional settlement.

Its strategic selectivity nevertheless shaped which organisations, activities and understandings of reconciliation could acquire institutional support [84]. Funding procedures and monitoring systems privileged projects capable of better expressing their aims [85,86]. Organisations possessing the expertise and resources required to navigate application and reporting processes were better positioned to participate [87]. Uptake was also uneven across communities and places, with nationalist organisations and areas often better positioned to mobilise European opportunities than their unionist counterparts [86]. Successive funding

cycles contributed to fragmentation and discontinuity, while the pathways connecting individual projects to broader reconciliation outcomes frequently remained implicit.

The limitation was therefore not that PEACE failed to generate coordination. Within its own programme architecture, it coordinated extensively. Its reach was, however, conditional and project-based. Initiatives were connected horizontally through shared funding priorities and administrative requirements, but were not consistently linked vertically to the core responsibilities and institutions of post-agreement governance [84].

The programme was therefore institutionally connected to the settlement, but its reconciliation objectives were not, however, correspondingly embedded across the wider machinery of government. The EU therefore operated neither as a substitute for domestic governance nor as an entirely separate actor, but as a compensatory metagovernor whose instruments addressed dimensions of peacebuilding that the constitutional architecture had left comparatively underdeveloped.

6. Practising Reconciliation: Relational Alignment in Civil Society

The most sustained expressions of reconciliation have often emerged within civil society and everyday social interaction [11,39]. Across Northern Ireland, grassroots actors, community organisations and informal networks have developed practices through which coexistence is maintained, relationships are rebuilt and the legacies of violence are negotiated in situ [52,79]. Some of these initiatives predated the 1998 settlement, while others acquired greater visibility and resources through the formal peace process and successive PEACE programmes [80,74]. Reconciliation at this level has therefore remained predominantly localised: embedded in particular places, relationships and practices rather than organised as a cross-cutting objective across the wider system of governance.

Civil-society initiatives varied considerably in their organisational form, community setting and explicit understanding of reconciliation, but the interview material revealed a recurring pattern: locally embedded practices could generate meaningful relational alignment while remaining weakly connected to wider structures of policy responsibility.

Long before the institutionalisation of the peace process, churches, community centres and private homes provided spaces in which contact could persist under conditions of conflict [88]. As one loyalist interviewee suggested, such encounters did not resolve underlying antagonisms, but helped preserve forms of relational continuity from which later initiatives could develop [89]. Reconciliation did not therefore originate solely within institutional design. It was also practised through the everyday ways in which communities managed proximity, maintained communication and created limited spaces of cooperation amid division [78].

Féile an Phobail offers one illustration. Established in West Belfast in 1988, the festival sought to challenge representations of the area defined exclusively by violence by celebrating the community's cultural life and collective energy [68]. Parades, street parties and affordable activities gradually provided an alternative to the confrontations associated with the August period. Féile was not straightforwardly a cross-community reconciliation initiative. Its significance lay instead in the capacity of local actors to redefine the social meaning of a contested place and transform streets associated with conflict into spaces of cultural participation [90].

Following 1998, civil-society activity became more visible and, in many cases, more formally organised [52]. Community actors sustained engagement during periods of political instability and translated the broader aspirations of the peace process into youth work, shared education, cultural initiatives, former-combatant dialogue and community development [91]. Many did not explicitly describe their work as reconciliation, but nevertheless contributed to it by building trust, maintaining communication and enabling practical cooperation across

communal boundaries [92]. The form of alignment produced within this arena was therefore principally relational: organised around coexistence and cooperation rather than a formally agreed definition of reconciliation.

The substantive character of this alignment was captured by one civil-society interviewee:

‘My definition of reconciliation would be [that] people have to come to [...] an aligned vision of how they see the communities moving forward in peace and prosperity. They have to come to an alignment, not an agreement. [...] The Protestant community and the Catholic community are never going to agree. [...] So, for me, the only way that we can get out of that conflict [...] is to agree on a way forward and a vision of how we can live together, work together and create prosperity together [...] in our differences.’
[77]

The distinction between ‘alignment’ and ‘agreement’ closely reflects the argument developed in this article. Reconciliation does not require consensus over identity or constitutional belonging, but a sufficiently shared orientation towards coexistence and practical cooperation despite enduring disagreement. Its policy object is therefore not the resolution of constitutional difference, but the organisation of relationships through which people can live and act together while retaining competing identities.

Metagovernance within this arena was exercised by trusted community leaders, initiative coordinators, former-combatant intermediaries and organisations capable of convening participants, mediating tensions and connecting community priorities to funders and public institutions. Their authority rarely derived from formal mandate. It rested instead on trust, reputation, local knowledge and an ability to operate across boundaries that official institutions often struggled to cross [93]. Through dialogue, mediation, cultural and educational activities and community development, they shaped the conditions under which interaction occurred and cooperation could be sustained.

Local embeddedness was a central source of strength [94]. It allowed initiatives to respond to the histories and sensitivities of particular communities rather than imposing a uniform model of reconciliation. Its limitations arose not from localisation itself, but from the weak and uneven connections between locally generated relational alignment and the wider structures through which political authority, resources and policy responsibility were organised.

Civil-society metagovernance was also strategically selective. The capacity to sustain reconciliation activity depended on local legitimacy, organisational resources, access to funding and the presence of individuals capable of maintaining relationships across communal boundaries [95]. Communities with established organisations and stronger connections to funders were therefore better positioned than those lacking comparable infrastructure.

Professionalisation intensified this selectivity. Formal funding provided resources and visibility, but also required complex relational work to be expressed through applications, measurable outputs and reporting procedures [96]. Organisations possessing the necessary administrative expertise acquired greater institutional recognition, while smaller groups and informal actors could be marginalised. Project cycles also privileged activities capable of producing visible short-term outputs over the slower and less measurable work of sustaining relationships [76].

Civil society consequently generated meaningful relational alignment, but its achievements often remained geographically bounded and institutionally precarious. Where public institutions did not assume sustained responsibility for societal transformation, much of the practical burden of reconciliation fell upon community organisations and grassroots intermediaries [97]. The problem was not that reconciliation was entrusted to local actors, whose contribution was indispensable, but that this delegation was not accompanied by durable mechanisms connecting local practice to wider political and policy structures.

For sustainable peace, locally grounded reconciliation need not be replaced by a centralised model. It does, however, require institutional support and cross-domain connections capable of preserving its contextual flexibility while reducing its dependence on temporary funding, individual leadership and uneven local capacity. Without these connections, reconciliation remains real and consequential, but fragmented across places and vulnerable over time.

7. From Theory and Practice to Policy: Domestic Attempts to Institutionalise

Reconciliation

The preceding analysis has shown how procedural, programmatic and relational forms of alignment developed across constitutional institutions, supranational intervention through the EU, and grassroots work. Yet, over the years, reconciliation did not remain confined to these arenas. Successive administrations have also sought to institutionalise dimensions of reconciliation through domestic policy in Northern Ireland [98], and forms of cross-border cooperation [99], often in response to the very gaps and tensions identified above: the persistence of segregation, the weak connection between political settlement and societal transformation, and the uneven relationship between governmental, programmatic and grassroots forms of peacebuilding. These efforts were articulated particularly through the languages of good relations, sharing and, later, dealing with the past [100]. Examining these interventions provides an important test of the argument developed above: what happened when successive administrations attempted to translate reconciliation into an explicit object of public policy? Was the explicit articulation of reconciliation-related objectives sufficient to generate a more durable form of cross-domain alignment? The section focuses on four particularly significant interventions: A Shared Future (2005) [101], Together: Building a United Community (2013) [102], the Stormont House Agreement (2014) [103], and the

subsequent legacy-policy architecture associated with the Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Act 2023 [104].

The strategy *A Shared Future* [98,101] represented one of the clearest early attempts to translate reconciliation-related concerns into domestic public policy. Emerging from the statutory commitment to promote ‘good relations’ and from an extended consultation led by the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, it sought to move beyond the management of political disagreement towards a more shared and pluralist society. Its ambitions were substantial: the strategy envisaged long-term, cross-government coordination, local action, wider public engagement, and intervention across areas including housing, education, community development and shared space [98].

Yet the policy object itself remained difficult to stabilise. Graham and Nash note, in line with patterns identified in the preceding sections, the absence of clear working definitions for key concepts such as reconciliation, integration, sharing and conflict, and argue that the strategy relied on a form of ‘constructive ambiguity’ through which actors holding opposed political positions could remain within a common policy process [98]. Nor did the strategy draw on the more explicit working definition of reconciliation already developed within the EU framework [81,82].

The resulting ambiguity was therefore not simply a limitation: it facilitated a degree of coordination and partial alignment around the need to address division. At the same time, however, it constrained the substantive definition of what reconciliation was expected to mean in practice. Rather than producing a settled reconciliation framework, ‘*A Shared Future*’ organised action around adjacent and more administratively tractable policy objects. The result was therefore not an absence of policy, but a selective institutionalisation of reconciliation: the strategy rendered particular dimensions of reconciliation governable while leaving their

relationship to an overarching reconciliation objective, and to efforts pursued across other governance domains, only weakly specified.

Subsequently, ‘Together: Building a United Community’ (TBUC) represented an attempt to move from the broader and more ambiguous language of A Shared Future towards a more operational framework for good relations. Published as part of the Programme for Government 2011–2015, TBUC retained the ambition of building a more united and shared society, but organised action around four more concrete priorities: children and young people, a shared community, a safe community, and cultural expression [102]. This gave the domestic policy architecture a clearer administrative form. Responsibility was distributed across government departments, communities and individuals, while specific programmes and indicators provided more tangible mechanisms through which progress could be funded, delivered and monitored.

Yet greater operational specificity did not necessarily stabilise reconciliation itself as the overarching policy object. Rather, reconciliation was increasingly translated into governable sub-fields, including shared spaces, youth engagement, community safety, cultural expression and measurable good-relations outcomes [102]. TBUC thus reduced some of the previous conceptual openness, but did so partly by decomposing reconciliation as a wider objective into administratively tractable priorities.

The result was stronger policy coordination and clearer lines of responsibility, without necessarily resolving how these different interventions might accumulate into a shared conception of reconciliation. This distinction between agreement on broad objectives and disagreement over their translation into policy was also evident in the fieldwork. As one NICS official working on good relations observed:

‘I think we can all agree on the areas that we want to improve [...] It can be challenging to get agreement on how that is done.’ [105]

The same official identified departmental silos and the need for better joined-up working as continuing constraints [105].

In 2014, the Stormont House Agreement [103] represented a new and more politically demanding attempt to institutionalise reconciliation, this time through specific mechanisms for dealing with the legacy of the conflict. Despite continuing disagreement over responsibility, victimhood and the legitimacy of past violence, the main Northern Irish parties, together with the British and Irish governments, were able to endorse a framework combining criminal investigation and information recovery [106]. The proposed Historical Investigations Unit was intended to investigate outstanding Troubles-related deaths, while the Independent Commission on Information Retrieval would enable families to seek information under arrangements protecting information provided to the Commission from use in subsequent criminal or civil proceedings [107].

In this regard, Leahy emphasises that the agreement attracted support from actors whose preferred approaches to justice and truth remained markedly different. Stormont House therefore offered a particularly clear example of alignment without agreement within the domestic reconciliation architecture [99,107]. Actors did not converge on a common interpretation of the past, but temporarily aligned around an institutional framework through which competing demands for truth, justice and information could be pursued. Its significance lies precisely in this distinction: reconciliation was not stabilised through consensus over historical meaning, but through agreement on procedures for governing disagreement over the past.

The durability of this alignment was nevertheless limited. The mechanisms devised in 2014 were not implemented, and subsequent UK policy progressively departed from the framework around which that alignment had been constructed. Scholars [100,108–110] interpret this shift partly through the asymmetric position of the UK state, whose sovereign authority and

domestic political interests enabled it to reshape the terms on which legacy was governed, even in the absence of comparable agreement among Northern Irish actors.

The Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Act 2023 [104] marked the clearest institutional expression of this departure, establishing the Independent Commission for Reconciliation and Information Recovery and introducing a controversial immunity scheme. Yet this architecture itself proved unstable.

Following judicial findings of incompatibility with the European Convention on Human Rights, the UK Government moved to remove the immunity provisions and restrictions on civil proceedings, while also announcing primary legislation to repeal and replace the 2023 Act [111]. Significantly, the UK and Irish governments' 2025 Joint Framework returned explicitly to principles associated with the Stormont House Agreement, including reconciliation, the rule of law, justice, information recovery and human-rights compliance.

Rather than demonstrating an absence of domestic policy, this trajectory reveals the difficulty of stabilising dealing with the past as a durable policy object. The institutional meaning attached to reconciliation has instead been repeatedly reconstructed as political authority, legal constraints and competing understandings of truth and justice have shifted. What changed, therefore, was not simply the machinery through which legacy was addressed, but the very terms through which reconciliation was made governable.

Taken together, these domestic interventions do not constitute a fourth form of alignment so much as repeated attempts to connect and institutionalise the forms identified above. As the same interviewee put it:

'I think one of our roles is to knit together the work of the other departments. So, for a lot of policy areas, we obviously don't hold the responsibility, but we need to make sure that the policy areas are aligned where possible in the name of peace building.' [105]

This formulation is revealing because it captures the metagovernance problem from within the administrative system itself: responsibility remains dispersed, while alignment depends on actors capable of connecting otherwise separate policy domains. In this sense, reconciliation is not institutionalised through a single centre of authority, but through the continuous work of linking policies, responsibilities and objectives that remain organisationally distinct.

In sum, this section has shown that domestic reconciliation policy was neither absent nor simply ineffective. It repeatedly generated partial forms of alignment, but around changing and sometimes deliberately ambiguous policy objects without stabilising their relationship to reconciliation as a durable cross-domain objective. From the perspective of technocratic metagovernance, the difficulty therefore lay not simply in implementation, but in the selective constitution of what reconciliation was made to mean, who was assigned responsibility for pursuing it, and which of its dimensions became institutionally governable. The problem, in other words, was not a lack of institutional activity, but the absence of a sufficiently durable architecture capable of connecting these selectively constituted objects across governance domains.

8. Conclusion

This article has shown that Northern Ireland has not failed to produce alignment. Rather, alignment has developed around different and comparatively narrow policy objects: institutional stability, participation in funded programmes and locally grounded coexistence, alongside successive domestic attempts to institutionalise particular dimensions of reconciliation itself.

The constitutional settlement produced procedural alignment around the management of political disagreement. Its actors do not share constitutional aspirations, national identities, interpretations of the conflict or a common vision of Northern Ireland's political future. They have nevertheless developed a sufficiently shared orientation towards participation in power-

sharing institutions, structured interaction and the maintenance of public authority. The three strands of the B/GFA institutionalised relationships within Northern Ireland, across the island and between the British and Irish governments, creating procedures through which actors pursuing incompatible political projects could continue to interact. This represents alignment amid substantive disagreement rather than consensus around reconciliation.

Supranational intervention through the EU generated a different, programmatic form of alignment. Through the PEACE programmes, actors with divergent political and practical motivations entered a common governance architecture organised around participation, partnership, funding criteria and project delivery. One of the programme's achievements was precisely to organise interaction without requiring identical preferences. Yet alignment with the programme did not necessarily become alignment around reconciliation. A transformative policy object was articulated more explicitly than within the constitutional settlement, but its implementation remained mediated through administrative categories, finite projects and funding cycles.

Civil society exhibited almost the reverse configuration. Within particular places and networks, grassroots actors developed the most substantively reconciliatory form of alignment identified in the article, organised around practical coexistence, relationship-building and social repair. Its limitation lay not in the depth or value of this work, but in its geographical and institutional reach. Local achievements frequently depended on particular individuals and organisations, remained vulnerable to short-term funding and possessed limited capacity to reshape the wider policy environment. They formed islands of impact: locally consequential but weakly connected to one another and to the principal institutions of post-agreement governance.

Northern Ireland therefore contains multiple forms of alignment differentiated by object, scale, depth and duration. Procedural alignment has sustained political interaction;

programmatic alignment has organised participation and directed resources towards peacebuilding; and relational alignment has enabled cooperation and repair within communities. Their limitation is not that they fall short of comprehensive reconciliation, but that they have not developed cumulatively around reconciliation as an operational and shared orientation linking constitutional institutions, public policy, external programmes and societal practice.

Domestic policy interventions did not constitute a fourth form of alignment. Rather, successive administrations repeatedly attempted to connect and institutionalise the forms identified above, from good-relations strategies to the governance of legacy and the past. In doing so, they rendered particular dimensions of reconciliation administratively governable, but without stabilising their relationship to reconciliation as a durable cross-domain objective. The domestic policy architecture therefore reinforces the argument developed here: the problem was not an absence of institutional activity, but the selective institutionalisation of different reconciliation-related objects without sufficiently durable connections between them.

This finding refines prevailing critiques of technocratic peacebuilding. Technocracy does not merely obstruct reconciliation by privileging procedure, efficiency and institutional maintenance over transformation. It is also productive: it translates disagreement into institutional routines, funding categories, eligibility criteria, monitoring systems and administratively manageable forms of interaction. Through these instruments, it makes particular forms of cooperation possible and gives some policy objects resources, responsibility and durability. Its limitations lie in the strategic selectivity of the objects around which those procedures organise alignment.

At the constitutional level, technocratic metagovernance privileged political stability and the managed continuation of interaction; at the European level, it organised actors around participation, funding and project delivery; and at the local level, external support provided

resources and organisational continuity while also potentially formalising and fragmenting relational work. Technocratic peacebuilding therefore produces concrete governance capacities while distributing institutional attention unevenly. It can align actors effectively around procedures and programmes while leaving the broader purposes those instruments are expected to serve comparatively weak, contested or disconnected.

The article also advances metagovernance theory. Metagovernance is not only the coordination of networks or the management of institutional interdependence, but the strategic organisation of alignment around policy objects. Metagovernors can help determine what problems become governable, which objectives acquire institutional force, where responsibility is located and what forms of activity count as progress. This helps explain how extensive coordination may coexist with weak transformation: governance arrangements can be internally effective while remaining oriented towards different objects and only loosely connected across domains.

The implications extend beyond Northern Ireland, although the case is not presented as a model to be generalised wholesale. The argument is most relevant to post-conflict settings characterised by dense institutional arrangements, multi-level intervention, substantial programme activity and politically contested understandings of peace. In such contexts, institutional complexity may generate extensive coordination without producing a shared direction across the domains through which peace is governed and experienced. The challenge is therefore not simply to create more institutions, increase participation or intensify coordination, but to examine what these activities are organised around and whether their achievements are connected to the objectives required for sustainable peace.

This does not imply that reconciliation should be centralised or imposed through a uniform institutional definition. Local flexibility, political accommodation and differentiated motivations may be indispensable in divided societies. What is required instead are stronger

and more reciprocal connections: clearer institutional responsibility for reconciliation, more durable support for relational work, mechanisms through which local knowledge can inform policy, and evaluative frameworks capable of recognising long-term relationship-building rather than only short-term programme outputs. Such arrangements would connect different forms of alignment without erasing the distinctive contribution of each.

The durability of peace cannot therefore be inferred from institutional survival alone. It also depends on whether the arrangements that maintain political stability are connected to processes of social repair, relational transformation and locally grounded coexistence. Peace becomes sustainable not simply when institutions endure, but when the objectives giving those institutions transformative purpose acquire sufficient definition, responsibility and reach across the domains through which peace is lived and governed.

Declaration of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the manuscript preparation process

During the preparation of this work, the author did not use generative AI or AI-assisted technologies to generate, draft, analyse, or substantively revise the manuscript. The author takes full responsibility for the content of the submitted article.

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