



**Civil Society Dialogue Network Policy Meeting**

**Youth in Conflicts:  
Agents for peace or recruits for armed groups?**

**Thursday 11 December 2014**

# **MEETING REPORT**

## **Introduction**

There have been over 50 meetings organised under the Civil Society Dialogue Network (CSDN) and the issue of youth in conflict has been a recurring theme. However, this was the first CSDN meeting specifically dedicated to the role that young people can play in building peace.

The overall objective of the policy meeting was to analyse how to work with young people in regions affected by or at risk of conflict to: (1) support their involvement in promoting peaceful change and transition of their societies; and (2) prevent them from being recruited into armed groups, including extremist, terrorist and criminal networks.

The meeting brought together representatives of peacebuilding civil society organisations (CSOs) based in Europe and conflict-affected countries, and officials from both the European Commission (EC) and the European External Action Service (EEAS).

This report is a summary of the discussion and the key recommendations made by participants during the meeting, which was held under the Chatham House Rule. No opinion expressed here may be attributed to any participating individual or institution, nor necessarily represents the views of EPLO or its member organisations.

For more information about this CSDN meeting, please contact Ben Moore at EPLO (E-mail: [bmoore@eplo.org](mailto:bmoore@eplo.org)).

### **Civil Society Dialogue Network**

The Civil Society Dialogue Network (CSDN) is a mechanism for dialogue between civil society and EU policy-makers on issues related to peace and conflict. It is co-financed by the European Union (Instrument for Stability). It is managed by the European Peacebuilding Liaison Office (EPLO), a civil society network, in co-operation with the European Commission (EC) and the European External Action Service (EEAS). The second phase of the CSDN will last from 2014 to 2016. For more information, please visit the [EPLO website](#).

## Session 1: Young people in regions affected by or at risk of conflict: Risks of recruitment and opportunities for promoting peace

The aim of the first session was for participants to analyse the risks of young people being recruited into armed groups, including extremist, terrorist and criminal networks, and the opportunities for working with them to promote peaceful change and transition of their societies.

### The speakers raised the following issues:

- Today's young generation is the largest young generation the world has ever seen: there are currently 1.8 billion people in the world between the ages of 10 and 24.
- Many fragile and conflict-affected countries have populations in which more than 50% are under 25.
- Even though young people form the majority of armed groups, only a minority of young people engage in violence.
- There is a perceived correlation between countries with violent conflicts and large populations of youth. Is it possible to turn it around? Could the large economic potential of so many young people become a stabilising factor?
- It is important to have an age-sensitive approach when focusing on conflict and post-conflict affected regions.
- Research led by Search for Common Ground (SFCG) into the motivating factors for young people joining armed groups in the north of Nigeria revealed *inter alia*:
  - The standard story points to the failures of adults, either bad parenting or the failures of the school system or the economy or other service provision.
    - Children and youth said they were involved for money and a sense of belonging and/or of purpose, or because they believed in the cause.
    - Other adults, including community leaders, representatives of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and government officials, saw less agency among the children and pointed to poverty, lack of jobs or education, indoctrination or the influence of politicians.
    - Representatives of armed groups tended to say that children were curious about their activities, and joined of their own accord, but that they did not participate in violence.
  - In many ways the Standard Story is correct and describes the situation of some young people associated with armed groups. However, the research allowed SFCG to go deeper and to understand a range of possible stories giving a more nuanced version of young people's pathways into and out of participation in armed groups.
  - As with child soldiers elsewhere, SFCG found that children and young people associated with armed groups in Nigeria are sometimes forced. But they also sometimes decide to join armed groups themselves, voluntarily. They sometimes do so for protection, a sense of belonging or even because it is fun.
- There is insufficient meaningful investment in young people.
- There is currently insufficient evidence or studies comparing urban versus rural situations, girls versus boys, and how they are influenced.
- It is necessary to abandon assumptions that children in armed conflicts are generally victims and that youths are generally troublemakers.
- It is also necessary to abandon the assumption that conflict is an exclusively male business.
- Young people are commonly excluded from normal decision-making processes and peace processes both locally and nationally.
- Young people should not only be the beneficiaries of development co-operation programmes: they should also be partners in shaping them.
- A good example of misplaced assumptions and focus is in disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) processes which tend to focus on armed youths despite the fact that they only account for a small proportion of the total youth population. This raises the question: What

messages are being sent to those children and youths who do not carry guns? Are the implementers of DDR processes inadvertently incentivising them to carry guns in order to receive attention?

- The UN Inter-Agency Network on Youth Development's (IANYD) Subgroup on Youth Participation in Peacebuilding, co-chaired by the United Nations Peacebuilding Support Office (PBSO) and Search for Common Ground (SFCG), has developed the [Guiding Principles on Young People's Participation in Peacebuilding](#).
- Three key messages from young people:
  1. "Listen to us!"
  2. There is a need for long-term solutions rather than short-term answers.
  3. The fact that such a broad range of actors (e.g. CSOs, the government, donors etc.) are working on youth issues helps to build confidence among children and young people.
- Evidence from The Philippines has shown that children are able to do good context analysis. World Vision International (WVI) is currently undertaking multi-level (community and national) context/conflict analysis.
- Examples of WVI's work with young people:
  - Youth and children's clubs (e.g. Nepal and Sri Lanka)
  - Creating space for involvement in decision-making processes (e.g. community-based organisations (CBOs) in India and Sri Lanka)
  - Cultural exchange programmes (e.g. Sri Lanka and East Africa)
  - Peace education curricula (e.g. India, Indonesia and Sri Lanka)

#### **Other participants raised the following issues:**

- How can the recruitment of young people to armed groups be prevented when those groups use effective cultural tools for that purpose (e.g. Sierra Leone)?
- Psychological and negative mental health impacts are often overlooked in reintegration processes. Are there examples in which they are addressed?
- Before the reintegration process in Sierra Leone, many children had a sense of belonging and leadership while being in the armed groups. Is it possible to recreate this sense of belonging? Can the leadership skills which young people have developed whilst in armed groups be put to good use when they are reintegrated?
- When international actors work with young people, they offer opportunities such as training (e.g. vocational training, advocacy, capacity building, media, civil society etc.) and there is an understanding that young people need to be active and "be the change". However, the young people often live in a context of limited state control, tribal laws, conservatism, limited or no space for youth engagement in civil society activities, and insecurity. What is needed, therefore, is for the overall situation to be changed.
- How can CSOs be involved in changing schooling systems and setting up youth and children's clubs?
- How do CSOs involve children in conflict analysis?
- Do CSOs extend identity development for youth to the national level?
- Are there examples of successful job creation activities?

#### **The speakers made the following comments in response to the issues raised by the other participants:**

- When speaking with children and young people, the notion of role models is very important. In almost all contexts, they do not have proper role models and, as a result, members of armed

groups become their role models. WVI is therefore trying to focus attention on those potential role models who have not taken up arms (e.g. teachers or religious leaders).

- WVI is also trying to create a sense of belonging and involvement through children's clubs as alternatives to armed groups.
- The key to addressing the various challenges lies in discussing them with young people themselves: they are highly capable of devising their own simple but effective solutions.
- Youth and children's clubs provide a location for children to attend after school or on weekends, when they do not have anything else to do. They allow them to play and work together, and to resolve problems and issues.
- It is also important to focus on how history is being taught in schools as it has an impact on creating identity.
- It is important to provide extra-curricular activities for youth and children (e.g. Scouts and Guides).
- Regarding the cultural issue, SFCG uses media, and social and cultural events to engage with young people in a language and a context which they understand.
- Regarding reintegration, the notion of leadership is very important. It is necessary to create structures which shift leadership from being part of an armed group to another role (e.g. from a young armed combatant to a community police leader).
- 'Five degree shift' from SFCG: When working with young people who are involved in violence or other negative activities, instead of thinking in terms of 'turning them around', it is more helpful to think in terms of helping them to direct their energies and resources towards more positive activities.
- Regarding employment, a great deal of attention is paid to job creation as a means of mitigating conflict and violence. However, the correlation between employment-creating measures and violence reduction remains weak. The motivating factors for young people to join armed groups are complex and job schemes are an insufficient deterrent. Issues of identity and dignity are also important and need to be taken into consideration.
- Regarding conflict analysis, the idea that it is possible to undertake conflict analysis or conflict scans at the beginning and end of a programme is flawed as the context is constantly changing in many fragile settings. It is therefore necessary to ensure ongoing conflict analysis, ideally undertaken by local people, and to ensure that this analysis is tied to programme activities and the key changes they are intended to effect.
- There is a need for intergenerational trust and understanding which translates into programming (e.g. including the families of the children and young people targeted). Guiding Principle 8 covers intergenerational partnerships.
- Radio programmes are very useful tools for intergenerational dialogue and understanding.
- There is a need for long-term funding. Funding for programmes is often only for one to two years, but it inevitably requires a longer timeframe for people to overcome deeply-held grievances.

## **Session 2: Supporting young people to promote peaceful change**

The aim of the second session was to explore the specific role which the EU institutions, EU Member States (MS) and European CSOs could play in supporting young people in regions affected by or at risk of conflict to promote peaceful change and transition of their societies.

### **The speakers raised the following issues:**

- In recent years, the EU has supported many activities relating to youth and conflict, but there is no specific strategy for youth *per se* (as opposed to children) within EU external action.

- Key EU documents include:
  - European Commission (EC) communication: '[A Special Place for Children in EU External Action](#)' (2008)
  - [EU Guidelines on Children and Armed Conflict](#) (2008)
  - Council of the EU resolution: [A renewed framework for Europe cooperation in the youth field \(2010-2018\)](#) (2009)
- The [EU Youth Strategy 2010-2018](#) is linked to the Council conclusions of November 2009. It defines the actions which the EU institutions and MS will take in implementing EU policy within the EU. One of the eight priorities of the Strategy is '[Youth and the world](#)'.
- In addition, the [Erasmus+ Programme](#) (2014-2020) is focused on three key actions: (1) Learning mobility of individuals; (2) Cooperation for innovation and exchange of good practices; and (3) Support for policy reform. (NB/ The geographical coverage varies between the three actions).
- Erasmus+ concentrates on empowering young people, including those with few opportunities. It focuses on international learning and mobility and the training of youth workers, and key themes are intercultural relations, youth participation, and encouraging youth employability.
- Erasmus+ aims to provide short- and long-term activities which will provide young people with better awareness of their situation in other countries and regions.
- Regarding the [Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace](#) (IcSP)<sup>1</sup>, youth issues have been included as part of the thematic priorities selected for the annual calls for proposals under conflict prevention, peace-building and crisis preparedness component (Article 4) since 2012.
- To date, no single call for proposals or action under the IcSP has focused exclusively on children or young people in conflicts. However, approximately € 8 million was allocated to relevant activities in the period 2012-2014.
- In addition, several actions supported under the crisis response component (Article 3) are also relevant for children and young people in conflicts. Examples of these actions include the [European Partnership for the Peaceful Settlement of the Conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh](#) and the [Confidence Building Early Response Mechanism \(COBERM\)](#) in Georgia.
- There is interest in looking at young people as agents for change in actions to be supported through IcSP Article 4 in 2015.
- The Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs has provided funding for a research study conducted by five agencies (WVI, SFCG, Save the Children, the United Network of Young Peacebuilders, and the Peace Action, Training and Research Institute of Romania) on the impact and quality of children and youth participation in peacebuilding in three countries: Colombia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and Nepal.
- There are a number of challenges relating to the way the EU approaches the issue of children and peacebuilding:
  1. The child soldier paradigm as entry point: This implies a focus on the combatants and related issues, but may also overlook the 'silent majority'. How can the EU also look beyond the recruitment of young people into or their exploitation by armed groups?
  2. From a needs-based approach to an empowerment-based approach: It is necessary to listen to what children and young people have to say, and to gain a better understanding of what they are already doing.
  3. Excessive focus on livelihoods: Although this is an important issue, it is also important to consider building peace skills.
- The July thematic focus of the European Year for Development is on 'Children and Youth'. This will provide an opportunity for further discussions on youth and peacebuilding (e.g. a CSDN meeting on development, conflict and youth).
- It would be helpful if the EU had a focus on children and young people as positive agents of change rather than addressing it under other themes such as education, gender empowerment, social media, interconfessional dialogue etc.

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<sup>1</sup> This is the successor to the Instrument for Stability (IfS) which existed 2007-2013.

- There is a need for a scaling up of networking in order to connect peacebuilders around the world so that they can see how they are working and engaging with young people.
- International actors should facilitate the involvement of young people in programming.

**Other participants raised the following issues:**

- It is important that programmes reach out to marginalised young people who are the most vulnerable to recruitment by armed groups.
- It is important that young people have the opportunity to meet other young people in their country who have very different backgrounds from theirs. How can this be facilitated?
- Regarding the Post-2015 Framework, is the main challenge the inclusion of youth and peacebuilding, or is it the connection between them?
- The implementation strategy for the EU Guidelines on Children and Armed Conflict includes a reference to an annual dialogue on children and armed conflict between EU delegations (EUDs) and local stakeholders. Do these dialogues take place? Do they provide an opportunity for the EU to engage with children and young people?
- Are there examples of young people using technology for peacebuilding work? Could there be more investment in technology in order to reach the most vulnerable?
- It is important that the EUDs are aware of the Guiding Principles on Young People's Participation in Peacebuilding so that EU policies can be aligned with them.
- Does the IcSP also support actions aimed at addressing radicalisation within and/or outside the EU?
- How can international actors draw lines between grassroots peacebuilding to higher conflict dynamics?
- Technology is not the be-all and end-all: young people from the most marginalised groups do not have access to social media.
- It could be useful to consider children's participation in truth commissions: although children are often victims of armed violence, they can also sometimes be parties to crimes.
- It appears that the EC is planning to support actions in the field of children's rights under both the IcSP and the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) in 2015. Have discussions taken place about how the various actions will be coordinated?
- There are many different areas in which youth could be mainstreamed (e.g. climate change, health, security, peacebuilding etc.).
- Are there examples of CSOs reaching out to youth organisations which are not working on peacebuilding *per se*, in order to encourage them to work in a more peace-sensitive manner? By targeting those types of organisations, it might be possible to scale-up efforts without the need to establish new ones focused specifically on peacebuilding.

**The speakers and other EU officials made the following comments in response to the issues raised by the other civil society participants:**

- Prior to the IcSP, there was the [Rapid Reaction Mechanism](#) (RRM). The first action in 2002 focused on building schools in Sri Lanka as a means to reduce and prevent conflict.
- One of the largest challenges has been trying to map and identify young people who are working on peacebuilding.

- The dual approach of focusing on livelihood and empowerment is key to unlocking access to vulnerable populations.
- International actors need to trust young people to contribute to their work and be willing to take risks in terms of trying new approaches.
- Regarding the Post-2015 Framework, youth and peacebuilding are both included in the proposals. However, they are not connected and it will probably not be possible to join them up.
- It is necessary to uncouple technology from innovation: the most innovative solutions do not need technology. However, it is important to note that young people are some of the most prevalent users of technology.
- There is a problem in popular culture: celebrities are not promoting a very peaceful message and peacebuilders are not seen as 'cool'.
- Regarding the EU Guidelines on Children in Armed Conflict, the 2010 implementation strategy outlines concrete actions which the EUDs and headquarters can undertake.
- Human rights focal points in the EUDs are supposed to consult local stakeholders, including on issues relating to children in armed conflict.
- The EC is reflecting on how to use both the EIDHR and the IcSP in order to achieve the maximum impact in the area of children and young people in armed conflicts.
- Regarding combating violent extremism (CVE), the EU is supporting the [Hedayah International Center of Excellence for CVE](#) through global and transregional threats and emerging threats component (Article 5) of the IcSP.
- It is not possible to use the IcSP to support actions in the area of CVE within the EU as the IcSP is an external assistance instrument meaning that activities funded need to take place outside the EU.
- There is a need for donors to increase the coordination between their programmes. In this context, understanding the cumulative impact of foreign assistance as it relates to measuring the quality of programmes and impact is crucial, especially in conflict-affected environments. An index for youth in fragile settings may help to provide clarity on this.
- SFCG is co-facilitating a process involving UN agencies and other CSOs on developing a practice note on up to 20 thematic areas which are relevant for both youth participation and peacebuilding. The practice note, which is due to be completed and launched in June 2015 and which is aimed at donor governments, multilateral agencies and foundations, is intended to identify for each theme: evidence about what works and what does not, emerging theories of change, and key policy- and programme-level recommendations for strengthening engagement with young people.
- CSOs are encouraged to look into the Erasmus+ Programme and to contact the European Youth Forum.

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