

***European Peacebuilding Liaison Office
(EPLO)***

***Final Evaluation of the
Civil Society Dialogue Network (CSDN) project
Phase II***

EVALUATION REPORT

**Brussels
March 2017**

Evaluator:

Bernd DRECHSLER

Acknowledgements

The evaluator wishes to acknowledge the full cooperation and support received from EPLO and the EU institutions during this evaluation. In particular, the evaluator would like to mention the EPLO Executive Director Ms. Sonya Reines-Djivanides and her team for the warm welcome and hospitality, as well as for organising meetings and interviews with stakeholders.

In addition, the evaluator wishes to acknowledge the numerous EU officials and other stakeholders who made themselves available for discussions for their unfailing courteousness and help. Any errors or misunderstandings arising from the interviews and the documentary reviews are the evaluator's own responsibility.

Executive Summary

The Civil Society Dialogue Network (CSDN) is a mechanism for dialogue between civil society and EU policy-makers on peace and conflict. It is co-financed by the European Union (Instrument contributing to Stability & Peace (IcSP)), the European Peacebuilding Liaison Office (EPLO), and managed by EPLO in co-operation with the European Commission (EC) and the European External Action Service (EEAS). The project contributes to strengthening EU and civil society capacity to anticipate, analyse, prevent and respond to threats to stability and human development posed by violent conflict and crisis.

The CSDN project started mid-2010. The second phase of the CSDN (CSDN II) covers the period from January 2014 to March 2017. A possible Phase III was under discussion (and agreed in principle) at the time of this evaluation.

The CSDN project fills a communication gap between civil society in EU Member States, in other (European) countries and in countries facing (mainly political) crisis on one side, and decision makers within EU institutions and Member States on the other side. As such, the project was and is highly relevant to the needs of both sides.

The total budget of the project is € 2.22 million co-funded by EPLO (10%) and the EU (90%) under the IcSP. The shift from 80/20 to 90/10 cost-sharing was one of the major changes in Phase II compared to Phase I.

The CSDN's main outputs are "Meetings" (in different categories) with the aim of promoting dialogue between civil society organisations (CSOs) and the EU institutions. Almost all stakeholders and participants interviewed expressed the opinion that the meetings were "very good", "successful" and "very well organised". CSDN meetings do indeed connect civil society with European level actors and decision-makers. CSOs had wanted to be better involved in European strategic planning since the early 2000s. The CSDN actually made it happen.

It has been repeatedly acknowledged that the CSDN delivers high-quality outputs (even under often difficult/sensitive circumstances) and that the team is constantly improving and able/willing to learn further. Most notably, the preparation of meetings, including the holistic upfront-discussion process (what do we really want to achieve?, how ? with whom ?, etc.) the preliminary provision of research and background information as well as the upfront preparation & briefing of and discussion with CSO participants have been praised by participants (especially from the EU institutions' side).

Nevertheless, several interviewees see room for improvement in terms of monitoring of outcomes and/or impact of meetings, and related feedback to CSO participants. Improved monitoring of and feedback on outcome and impact would not only be welcomed by participants and partners, but it would also help improve the efficiency of CSDN efforts and could lead to increased and wider dialogue and follow-up beyond the CSDN.

The project agreement outlines that CSDN II aims to organize 32 meetings over 3 years in various categories. At the time of this evaluation, 47 meetings had been organised. The CSDN anticipates a total of 50 meetings are likely to be held by the end of the project on 31 March 2017. This means that the CSDN is significantly over-delivering on the number of meetings requested for most categories of meetings. It also means that a total of around 90 meetings will have been held since the start of the CSDN initiative in 2010.

After six years of CSDN, it can certainly be said that a robust civil society dialogue mechanism is in place and is embedded within relevant EU institutions. Additionally, CSOs no longer understand the EU as a "strange animal, either to fear or to milk" (as reported by an interviewee) but as a powerful partner, that could potentially help them implement their agenda and achieve their mission and vision.

CSO positions indeed find their way¹ into EU strategies, etc. even if it is not always easily traceable. Firstly, such inputs are diluted due to the long and complex EU decision-making process and, secondly, sensitive issues are often considered confidential and classified.

Overall Conclusion: The CSDN is certainly a success. CSDN II overcame most of the teething problems identified in Phase I. To date, the project fulfils to a very large extent the expectations of partners and beneficiaries and contributes significantly towards the achievement of its objectives.

Consequently, it is recommended to continue with the initiative and to implement Phase III of the CSDN – if possible without a gap, from 1 April 2017 onwards. Stakeholders expect “more of the same” rather than radical changes in the approach. Nevertheless, a few recommendations are made below.

CSDN-specific recommendations: (Short-term to be considered for CSDN III)

In-country meetings: It is widely agreed that in-country meetings are interesting and useful, even if it is understood that implementing such meetings in-country raises various additional challenges. Despite difficulties, it is recommended to consider increasing the number of in-country meetings. It is recommended (if appropriate), to consider combinations, doing Brussels-meetings as well as in-country meetings on the same topic to achieve broader outreach.

Preparation & briefing of participants: Preparation, briefing of and discussion with CSO participants have been praised by participants (especially from the side of the EU institutions) as one of the strengths of CSDN meetings. However, some CSO participants mentioned that EU officials who are not directly involved in the organisation of the meetings appear sometimes less prepared and briefed than their CSO counterparts. It is recommended to consider strategies to ensure better upfront preparation of EU participants.

Monitoring of outcomes and/or impact of meetings and feedback to participants: Several stakeholders mentioned that there was room for improvement in terms of monitoring of outcomes and/or impact of meetings and related feedback to CSO participants. It is widely understood that such a monitoring or assessment of impact/outcome of CSDN events is not easy and it varies significantly according to the type of meeting and issues discussed. Participants invest considerable time and effort in CSDN meetings but it is, in most cases, difficult for them to see the “success”. (“so what....?”). It is therefore recommended to consider ways to improve monitoring of meeting outcomes. It is understood that this task will require dedicated resources. One suggestion would be to choose “pilot-meetings” across the various categories and introduce monitoring throughout the entire cycle from the planning phase until several months after the event (incl. feedback to participants). This would enable assessing whether, to what extent, and for which categories, it would be appropriate and feasible to develop and roll-out full monitoring and evaluation (M&E).

CSO/EPLO-specific recommendations (Mid-term)

Post-2020 strategies: Changes within the EU (e.g. Brexit), EU institutions and policies are expected in the near future and these changes are likely to affect or concern CSOs in several ways (e.g.: post-2020 scenarios, general and specific budget cuts, etc.). Stakeholders feel that EPLO could use the capacity and momentum of the CSDN to be more proactive in raising the voice of EPLO members and CSOs in order to influence the EU’s “post-2020 agenda” and other concepts and strategies timely and meaningfully.

¹ E.g.: It has been reported from the IcSP’s side, that outcomes from CSDN Funding Instruments Meetings are directly reflected in Annual Action Programmes.

List of abbreviations

AAP	Annual Action Programme
CONCORD	CONfederation for COoperation of Relief and Development NGOs
CSDN	Civil Society Dialogue Network
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
DEU	Delegation of the European Union
EC	European Commission
EEAS	European External Action Service
EPLO	European Peacebuilding Liaison Office
EU	European Union
FPI	Foreign Policy Instruments
IcSP	Instrument contributing to Stability & Peace
IDM	In-country Dialogue Meeting
IfS	Instrument for Stability
LF	Logical Framework
M&E	Monitoring and Evaluation
MENA	Middle East, North Africa
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
OECD-DCD-DAC	OECD-Development Co-operation Directorate
OVI	Objectively Verifiable Indicator
POG	Project Oversight Group
ROM	Result Oriented Monitoring
ToR	Terms of Reference
UN	United Nations

Table of Content

Executive Summary	3
1 Introduction	7
1.1 Background.....	7
1.1.1 The “Civil Society Dialogue Network (CSDN)” project.....	7
1.1.2 European Peacebuilding Liaison Office (EPLO).....	7
1.2 Description of the assignment.....	7
1.2.1 Global objective.....	7
1.2.2 Specific objectives	8
1.3 Methodology.....	8
1.3.1 General Approach	8
1.3.2 Key stakeholders.....	9
1.4 Objective and overview of this report.....	9
2 Relevance & Design	11
2.1 Relevance:	11
2.2 Design.....	11
2.2.1 Intervention Logic:.....	11
2.2.2 Budget.....	12
3 Efficiency.....	13
3.1.1 General implementation issues and observations	13
3.1.2 Activities implemented.....	13
3.1.3 Financial and human resource management.....	16
4 Effectiveness	16
4.1 Introduction.....	16
4.2 Effectiveness of CSDN Meetings.....	17
5 Impact.....	17
5.1 Introduction.....	17
5.2 Specific Objectives:	17
5.2.1 Specific Objective 1 & 2.....	17
5.2.2 Specific Objective 3.....	18
5.3 Overall Objective	18
6 Sustainability	19
6.1 Sustainability of EPLO and CSDN initiatives and outputs	19
6.2 Potential sustainability of the impact.....	20
7 Cross-Cutting Issues.....	20
8 Overall Conclusions, Recommendations & Lessons Learned	21
8.1 Overall Conclusion:.....	21
8.2 Lessons learned, observations & recommendations:.....	21
ANNEXES	23
ANNEX 1: List of persons interviewed/consulted	24
ANNEX 2: Terms of Reference	25

1 Introduction

1.1 Background

1.1.1 The “Civil Society Dialogue Network (CSDN)” project

The Civil Society Dialogue Network (CSDN) is a mechanism for dialogue between civil society and EU policy-makers on peace and conflict. It is co-financed by the European Union (Instrument contributing to Stability & Peace (IcSP)), the European Peacebuilding Liaison Office (EPLO), and managed by EPLO in co-operation with the European Commission (EC) and the European External Action Service (EEAS). The project contributes to strengthening EU and civil society capacity to anticipate, analyse, prevent and respond to threats to stability and human development posed by violent conflict and crisis².

The European Peacebuilding Liaison Office (EPLO) organises CSDN events in the form of “CSDN meetings” of various types, which are open to all interested civil society actors and take place in Brussels, EU Member States and, in exceptional cases, in conflict-affected countries with an EU presence. The CSDN discusses policy, strategic and programming aspects of the Peacebuilding Partnership, transversal thematic issues relating to peacebuilding and crisis-specific situations.

The CSDN project started mid-2010. The second phase of the CSDN (CSDN II) covers the period from January 2014 to March 2017³. A possible Phase III was under discussion (and agreed in principle) at the time of this evaluation.

1.1.2 European Peacebuilding Liaison Office (EPLO)

As stated on its website⁴, EPLO is an independent civil society platform of European NGOs, networks of NGOs and think tanks which are committed to peacebuilding and the prevention of violent conflict.

It aims to influence the EU so that it promotes and implements measures which lead to sustainable peace between states and within states and peoples, and which transform and resolve conflicts non-violently. EPLO wants the EU to recognise the crucial connection between peacebuilding, the eradication of poverty, and sustainable development worldwide, and the crucial role NGOs have to play in sustainable EU efforts for peacebuilding, conflict prevention, and crisis management.

To date, EPLO has 34 member organisations⁵ from 13 European countries (10 EU Member States plus Kosovo, Norway and Switzerland).

1.2 Description of the assignment

1.2.1 Global objective

According to the Terms of Reference⁶, the global objective of this assignment is to provide a comprehensive evaluation of the results of the project and lessons to be applied in the next phase of the project.

² <http://eplo.org/activities/ongoing-projects/civil-society-dialogue-network/>

³ After a no-cost extension of 3 months

⁴ www.eplo.org

⁵ Link to a map showing the location of EPLO member organisations' offices around the world (01/2015). <http://maps.google.be/maps/ms?msid=202878622807887654123.0004a8e1e1446233e4481&msa=0>

⁶ ToR are attached in the annex.

1.2.2 Specific objectives

Specific objectives are:

- 1) To identify the results of the CSDN project so far
- 2) To assess the management of the CSDN project by EPLO
- 3) To identify any challenges in the implementation of the project
- 4) To list recommendations for improvement of the CSDN

1.3 Methodology

1.3.1 General Approach

As stipulated in the ToR, the consultant studied the achievements of the project so far, its contribution to the objective, and performance in terms of expected results. This was done in accordance with the EU evaluation guidelines based on the five main DAC⁷-standard evaluation criteria:

- Relevance
- Efficiency
- Effectiveness
- Impact
- Sustainability

Also, lessons learnt and corresponding recommendations for a possible Phase III and/or future activities of a similar nature were outlined.

The evaluator conducting this assignment also conducted the evaluation of CSDN Phase I towards the end of 2012. Therefore, the implementation of Phase II can be assessed *vis à vis* Phase I. It has been assessed whether recommendations made during the Phase I evaluation have been followed in the design and implementation of Phase II and, if yes, to what extent this led to the desired improvements. The 2012 CSDN evaluation as well as EPLO's CSDN I Final Project Report (2014) provide baseline information/data for CSDN II.

The methodology for the present evaluation is based on the following main steps and methods, all of which have been applied by the consultant in similar past assignments and have proven to be most appropriate:

- Briefing with EPLO;
- Desk research and review of relevant documents;
- Meetings / semi-structured interviews with relevant stakeholders, including:
 - EU-institutions (EEAS, EC, etc.)
 - EPLO member organisations
 - Participants of CSDM activities
 - EPLO staff
 - other relevant stakeholders
- Debriefing with EPLO incl. presentation of preliminary findings and recommendations as well as discussion at the end of the mission;

⁷ Evaluation criteria from the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of the Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD): <https://www.oecd.org/dac/evaluation/49756382.pdf>

It has been agreed to choose six CSDN meetings of various types as basis for the evaluation.

These were:

- The CSDN Geographic Meeting on 'The situation of Rohingya refugees from a regional perspective: International responses and policy options for the EU' (March 2015)
- The CSDN Funding Instruments Meeting, IcSP, Consultation on 2016 programming (October 2015)
- The CSDN meeting on the Strategic Review of EUMM Georgia (September 2015)
- The CSDN meeting on the Strategic Review of EULEX Kosovo: Assessing progress towards the end state of the Mission (June 2015)
- The CSDN Training Seminar on the EU & Peacebuilding (July 2015)
- The CSDN Policy Meeting on 'The EU-wide Strategic Framework for Security Reforms: Consultation workshop with civil society organisations' (December 2015)

Based on this choice of meetings, an indicative list of interviewees and documents was prepared. This assignment did not include individual evaluations of these six meetings. (Individual evaluations of these CSDN meetings were carried out by EPLO after they took place).

The Draft Evaluation Report has been shared with relevant stakeholders. Comments received on the draft report have been considered and incorporated into this Final Evaluation Report.

1.3.2 Key stakeholders

Key stakeholders of this evaluation are:

- CSDN Project Oversight Group
- EPLO Management
- EU institutions, namely EEAS and the EC
- EPLO Member Organisations

1.4 Objective and overview of this report

This evaluation report summarises findings, conclusions, observations, “lessons learned” and recommendations to be applied in Phase III of the project and in any potential future similar intervention.

It is now up to the Project Oversight Group (POG) to discuss the issues further, draw the right conclusions and take joint decisions.

Structure of the Report

Chapter 1 provides an overview of the CSDN as well as of the assignment, including global and specific objectives, required outputs and deliverables. It also outlines the methodology used for this evaluation. Finally, it provides an outline and the structure of this report.

Chapter 2 focuses on the relevance & design of the programme. The relevance was assessed in view of demands and expectation of project partners, beneficiaries and target groups. The design was analysed focusing *inter alia* on the project's intervention logic (logframe), objectives and expected results.

Chapter 3 describes the efficiency of project implementation and management.

Chapter 4 looks at the effectiveness and assesses the extent to which the activities undertaken led to the expected results as listed in the project proposal and action fiche.

Chapter 5 analyses the impact of these results and the extent to which they are likely to contribute towards reaching the desired specific and overall objectives.

Chapter 6 assesses the (potential) sustainability of the activities and programme outputs including EPLO as an organisation, as well as the sustainability of the potential impacts.

Chapter 7 describes extent to which crosscutting issues, such as human rights, (good) governance, gender, environmental issues, etc. have been considered in the programme's planning and implementation.

Chapter 8 provides conclusions, observations/lessons learned as well as recommendations for similar interventions in the future.

The Annex includes a list of persons interviewed and the ToR for this assignment.

2 Relevance & Design

2.1 Relevance:

The CSDN project fills a communication gap between civil society in EU Member States, in other (European) countries and in countries facing (mainly political) crisis on one side, and decision-makers within EU institutions and Member States on the other side. As such, the project was and is highly relevant to the needs of both sides.

The EC has deployed efforts to enhance its relations with the civil society sector on peacebuilding issues with the objective of establishing a coherent, balanced and transparent dialogue since early 2008.

EPLO aims to provide a platform for civil society to influence the EU so that it promotes and implements measures which lead to sustainable peace between states and within states and peoples, and which transform and resolve conflicts non-violently.

The CSDN's ultimate target groups are the populations of conflict-affected countries.

Its direct beneficiaries are:

- Civil society organisations in Europe and in conflict-affected countries;
- EU policy-makers, including those in the EU institutions and in EU Member States' governments;

It can firmly be said that the project responds to the needs of these target groups and beneficiaries.

The CSDN is funded by the Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace (IcSP). The CSDN is clearly in line with the IcSP priority (Article 4.1 (b)) which states⁸: "facilitating and building capacity in confidence-building, mediation, dialogue and reconciliation, as well as Article 4.2 (b) "Measures under this Article shall contribute to the further development of a structural dialogue on peace-building issues."

The grant was awarded directly to EPLO outside the scope of a call for proposals. This was and is justified due to the fact that there is currently no other organisation or platform in place within the EU's periphery⁹ with a similar mandate and/or member-base.

2.2 Design

2.2.1 Intervention Logic:

Unlike Phase I, Phase II is based on a logical framework (logframe).

The logframe states one overall objective (namely: *"to contribute to strengthening EU and Civil Society capacity to anticipate, analyse, prevent and respond to threats to stability and human development posed by violent conflict and crisis"*), three specific objectives and five expected results.

The logframe is coherent and of good quality. Indicators at impact level are mainly qualitative while those on outcome- and output-level include both qualitative and quantitative indicators and respective sources of verification. The only (and rather minor) weakness of the logframe is that Assumptions/Risks (which are supposed to reflect entirely on external conditions) are to a certain extent referring to internal issues which are within the power and mandate of the CSDN partners or management. (e.g. *"EPLO needs to maintain an adequate staffing level"*.)

⁸ Instrument for Stability-Multi-Annual Indicative Programme 2012-2013; EC, (2012)

⁹ It is understood that there are similar platforms cooperating with UN-agencies based in Geneva and New York. Other platforms such as Brussels-based CONCORD are concentrating mainly on relief and development issues.

The logframe is used for internal monitoring and reporting. It has been noted that the annual (interim narrative) reporting follows the logframe structure very closely¹⁰.

2.2.2 Budget

The total budget of the project is € 2.22 million co-funded by EPLO (10%) and the EU (90%) under the IcSP. The shift from 80/20 to 90/10 cost-sharing was one of the major changes in Phase II compared to Phase I.

During Phase I, the 20% contribution for co-funding of CSDN activities was using up almost all revenue from EPLO membership fees. The arrangement hardly left any "free" funds for EPLO's activities outside the scope of the CSDN. Additionally, limited EPLO funds were the main constraint justifying the project's absorption capacity.

Now, the IcSP funds contribute "only" about 2/3 to EPLO's overall budget which gives a more balanced picture. This situation allows EPLO to develop its own activities and agenda also outside the scope of CSDN which contributes towards the achievement of Result No.3: "Consolidation and reinforcement of EPLO's capacity...."

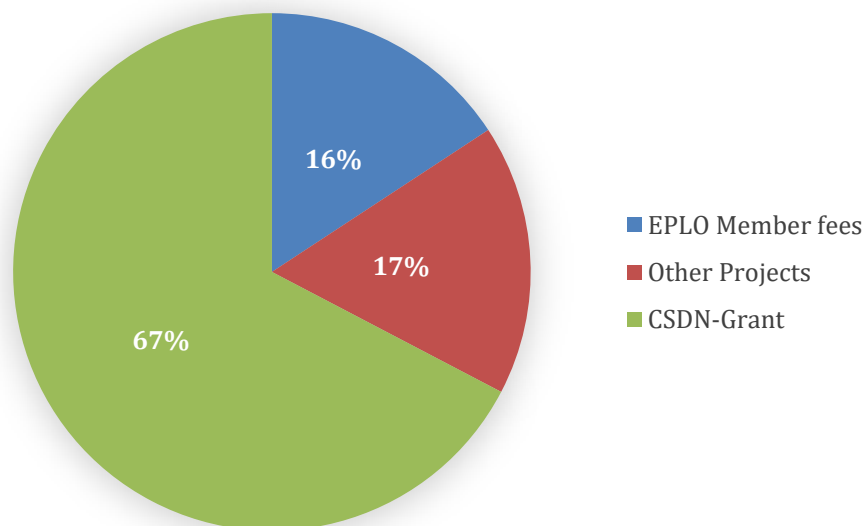


Figure 1: Break down of EPLO's overall budget for 2015 (source: EPLO)

The budget of the CSDN project appears also appropriate. 57% of the budget is earmarked for human resources, 20% are used for travel costs including per diem¹¹ for non-Brussels based seminar/conference participants, which is certainly justified by the nature of the project, which has, according to some of the stakeholders, "the ability to fly people in" as one of its most important features. The 16% for "other costs" are mainly used to fund the meetings themselves including preparation as well as research, studies, publications, etc. 7% for overhead costs are EC-standard.

¹⁰ Therefore, there was no need to duplicate this in detail in this evaluation report (which, of course is also based on the project logframe)

¹¹ In the CSDN budget, all per diem appear under the "Human Resources" budget line. Nevertheless, for a better understanding of the actual costs, in this budget breakdown per diem for non-Brussels-based seminar/conference participants are counted under "Travel", while per diem for CSDN staff are counted under "Human Resources".

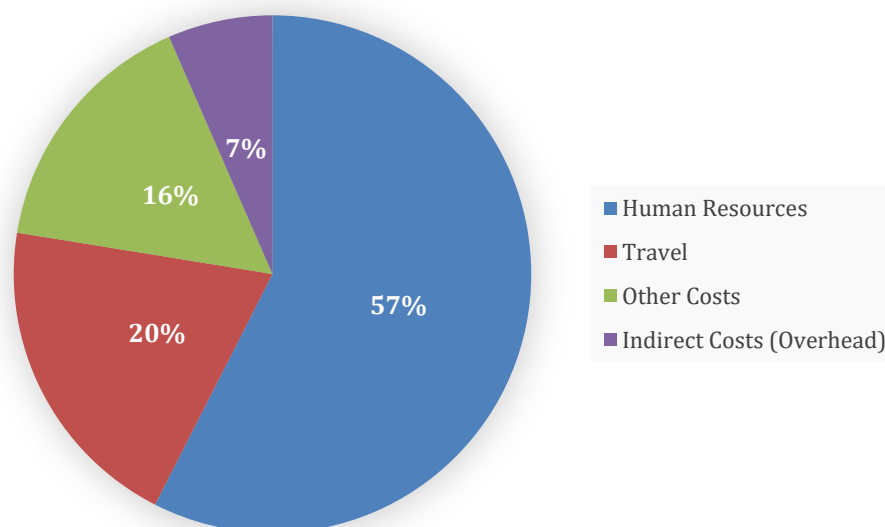


Figure 2: Break down of CSDN II's overall budget (source: EPLO)

3 Efficiency

3.1.1 General implementation issues and observations

The project implementation is guided by an activity schedule (the CSDN action plan). This schedule needs regular updating since many of the meetings are organised in an *ad hoc* manner and/or on request from one of the partners (EU institutions, EPLO or EPLO members), often reacting to emerging crisis, etc. EPLO is very flexible in adapting the schedule to accommodate such needs.

The project is well managed by EPLO's own internal management structure (internal management + EPLO Steering Committee) as well as by the Project Oversight Group (POG).

The POG meets quarterly which is considered appropriate by its members. The POG, which is composed of representatives from the EU institutions, EPLO as well as EPLO member organisations, decides on the work plans and the meetings to be implemented. Additionally, any other issues, such as feedback on meetings¹², lessons learned, etc. are discussed. Towards the end of CSDN I, several interviewees had expressed the view that the POG was too much involved in 'micro-management' issues, instead of concentrating on its core function which is to discuss and decide on overall issues. No complains of this kind have been expressed in this evaluation of CSDN II, which suggests that this is not seen as an issue anymore.

As reported from all sides, cooperation and communication between actors is satisfactory.

3.1.2 Activities implemented

3.1.2.1 Quality of outputs

The CSDN's main outputs are "Meetings" (in different categories) with the aim of promoting dialogue between CSOs and EU institutions. Almost all stakeholders and participants interviewed expressed the opinion that the meetings were "very good", "successful" and "very well organised", (even if they found it difficult to come up with clear and objective quality-indicators for "successful"). It has been repeatedly acknowledged that the CSDN delivers

¹² Inter alia, questionnaires are distributed to participants after the meetings for feedback.

high-quality outputs (even under often difficult/sensitive circumstances) and the team is constantly improving and able/willing to learn further. Most notably, the preparation of meetings, including the holistic preliminary discussion process (what do we really want to achieve? how? with whom?, etc.) the upfront provision of research and background information as well as the upfront preparation & briefing of and discussion with CSO participants have been praised by participants (especially from the EU institutions' side).

Some CSO participants mentioned that EU officials who are not directly involved in the organisation of meetings appear sometimes less prepared and briefed compared with their CSO counterparts. It is understood that this issue may not be easy to solve since, as some interviewees explained, officials from EU institutions are most often very busy and they may not find the time for more preparation or reading even if sufficient information is provided upfront.

Several interviewees see room for improvement in terms of monitoring of outcomes and/or impact of meetings, and related feedback to CSO participants. It is widely understood that such a monitoring or assessment of impact/outcome of CSDN events is not easy in practice due to the length and complexity of EU's internal decision-making processes. Additionally, feedback varies significantly according to the type of meeting and sector, as issues discussed are sometimes (politically) sensitive and meeting outputs are therefore classified.

Participants invest considerable time, resources and efforts in CSDN meetings but in many cases, it is difficult for them to see "success". ("so what.....?"). So far, feedback has been collected mainly by distributing satisfaction surveys to participants after each meeting. This survey usually covers only the meeting *per se* but not its broader outcome. Moreover, the return rate for these questionnaires (especially from the institutions' side) is not impressive

Therefore, and despite all these challenges, it is recommended to consider ways to improve the monitoring meetings' outcomes. It is understood that this task will require dedicated resources. One suggestion would be to choose "pilot-meetings" across the various categories and introduce monitoring for them throughout the entire cycle. Efficient monitoring has to be foreseen already at the planning stage for a timespan that goes beyond the meeting implementation until several months after the event (incl. feedback to participants). This experience could enable to assess whether, to which extent, and for which categories, it would be appropriate and feasible to develop and roll out full M&E. It should also be considered and tested what may be the best way to give feedback to participants and what kind of feedback is needed, relevant and feasible as well as to whom.

Improved monitoring and feedback of outcomes and impacts would not only be welcome by participants and partners, but it would also improve the efficiency of CSDN efforts and could lead to increased and wider dialogue and follow-up beyond the CSDN.

All interviewees from the EU institutions' side stated their support for improved monitoring and follow-up, and confirmed that they would personally be willing to contribute to this if EPLO was to initiate such efforts.

3.1.2.2 Quantity and type of outputs

The project agreement outlines that CSDN II aims to organise 32 meetings over 3 years in various categories. At the time of this evaluation, 47 meetings had been organised¹³. The CSDN anticipates a total of 50 meetings likely to be implemented by the end of the project on 31 March 2017. This means that a total of around 90 meetings will have been held since the start of the CSDN initiative in 2010.

¹³ As of end of February 2017

Type of meetings	Total number required by contract	Total as of end of February. 2017	Total likely at the end of the project
Geographic Meetings (incl. In-country Dialogue and Early Response Meetings)	10	10	11 (+1)
Funding Instruments Meetings	3	4	4 (+1)
Policy Meetings	9	23	23 (+14)
Member State Meetings	3	3	4 (+1)
International Peacebuilding Meetings	2	3	3 (+1)
Training Seminars	5	4	5
Total	32	47	50 (+18)

Source: EPLO

This means that the CSDN is significantly over-delivering on the number of meetings requested for most categories of meetings. On the one hand, this is because upfront financial planning for meetings for the entire project period is complicated by the fact that the nature of the meetings and issues discussed is decided on a case-by-case basis or in an *ad hoc* manner. It is difficult to anticipate detailed costs since this depends on the number of people invited (or able to participate, etc.). Meetings turned out to be overall less costly and as a result, more meetings could be organised than initially estimated. On the other hand, this indicates that EPLO is indeed a dedicated and committed partner in the CSDN, since a contracted service provider would not have over-delivered so much “extra-output”.

So far, three so-called “In-country Dialogue Meetings” (IDMs, counted under “Geographic Meetings”) were held, i.e. two in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and one in Myanmar. Most stakeholders asked about the relevance and feasibility of in-country meetings started their answer with “it depends...” It was widely agreed that such in-country-meetings are interesting and useful, even if it is understood that implementing them raises various additional challenges, including (but not limited to):

- i) security issues in crisis-affected countries are sometimes unpredictable;
- ii) these and other unpredictable factors make the budgeting difficult; cost may get over the top;
- iii) sometimes it may be more appropriate to meet on neutral ground (such as Brussels),
- iv) depending on the political situation, the host country's government may not approve such a meeting (e.g. Zimbabwe),
- v) not so many or hardly any Brussels-based senior/key people from the EU-side would attend meetings outside Europe due to time and budget constraints;

Additionally, the work and role of the respective EU delegation in the country would have to be taken into consideration. The fact that the EU delegation comes in as an additional player may make the IDM-task easier or more complicated.

Despite all these difficulties, it is recommended to consider increasing the number of IDMs in general. Obviously, both Brussels-based and in-country events have their specific strengths & weaknesses. Therefore, it is suggested (if appropriate and feasible), to consider

combinations, doing Brussels-meetings as well as in-country meetings on the same topic to achieve broader outreach.

3.1.3 Financial and human resource management

So far, audits indicated that the CSDN's financial execution is satisfactory.

Two addenda to the original budget have been agreed in order to redistribute funds among budget lines to better accommodate real needs. The 2nd addendum was done in line with a 3-month no-cost-extension, which has been granted at the end of 2016. The main reason was the fact that unused funds were still available. At the time of this evaluation, end of February 2017 (with 3 events still outstanding), it was estimated that available funds will be used up to almost 100% by the end of Phase II.

During Phase I, the lack of human resources was mentioned as the major hinderer to more efficient project implementation.

To date, the number of EPLO staff is considered generally sufficient. The team has been strengthened in terms of logistical support to handle logistics (travel, visa, bookings, etc.), which allows the policy officers to concentrate more on the actual content of the task. Nevertheless, additional support would help smoothen the preparation process and additional human resources may be needed to apply the recommendations of this report (see chapter 8 below) in terms of M&E and preparation of EU officials.

The EPLO team itself has been praised by numerous stakeholders as highly competent and very committed.

4 Effectiveness

4.1 Introduction

Chapter 4 looks at the project effectiveness and assesses the extent to which the activities undertaken led to the 5 expected results, which are:

- R1 Strengthened CSDN capacity to connect civil society with European level actors, decision-makers and to inform the strategic direction of EU conflict prevention and peace building activities through preparation of issues papers and literature reviews and organisation of conflict analysis workshops on area of common interest to the network.
- R2 Promotion of an EU dimension in the international discourse on conflict prevention and peace-building issues. Better understanding, by all actors involved and by the European public, of conflict prevention and peace building issues and the EU role in this regard. Relevant information is shared and best practice exchanged by the peace building community.
- R3 Consolidation and reinforcement of EPLO's capacity in managing the CSDN and its coordination, policy and network functions.
- R4 Generating expertise among civil society on the peacebuilding agenda at European level through dynamic participatory work among participants in the CSDN; reinforcement of peacebuilding capacity of civil society actors involved.
- R5 Recommendations on the possibilities of applying the model of the CSDN on a regional basis, taking into account existing networking opportunities.

4.2 Effectiveness of CSDN Meetings

The various types of meetings (the CSDN's main outputs) potentially cover all expected results with the exception of Result No. 5 ("possibilities of applying the model of the CSDN on a regional basis"). A feasibility study on this subject was carried out by EPLO in 2014. It was discussed with the POG (i.e. with the EC and the EEAS). In 2015, it was jointly decided not to continue this effort and the work was stopped due to limited interest.

"Member State Meetings" provide a unique opportunity to bring decision-makers from the host Member States, EU institutions, CSOs from the host country and from crisis-affected countries around the same table.

The "Training Seminars" are highly appreciated by participating NGOs since they are considered interesting and highly practical.

CSDN meetings do indeed connect civil society with European level actors and decision-makers. CSOs had wanted to be better involved in European strategic planning (with regards to conflict prevention and peacebuilding) since the early 2000s. The CSDN has actually made this happen.

Overall, the evaluation shows a high level of trust from the side of participating CSOs and EPLO members who find that meetings held under the CSDN are useful in terms of getting their voices heard and getting their messages across to the EU institutions. In return, these meetings increase their understanding of EU politics, policies and *modus operandi*. Positive feedback from EU officials interviewed and the highest level of participation and buy-in from the side of the EU institutions in general suggest that CSDN activities enjoy a good reputation and are considered relevant and useful.

During Phase I, EPLO was seen by quite a few EU officials as a service provider, organising such meetings on behalf of and funded by the EU institutions. This perception has largely changed and improved significantly, and most EU officials understand and accept EPLO and its members now more as partners in a mutual process. The CSDN meetings are indeed appreciated as a rare opportunity for dialogue rather than a "one-way information gathering". EPLO provides a (very appreciated and high quality) service by connecting both sides with people and institutions they would otherwise find very difficult to meet, and it is now seen as an opportunity to increase mutual understanding on an (almost) equal peer-to-peer basis.

Nevertheless, the information flow from CSOs towards the EU appears more prominent than the one from the EU towards CSOs. It is recommended that the EU institutions consider (encouraged by EPLO) using the CSDN to disseminate EU positions and strategies beyond formal presentations and speeches in meetings and to make the CSDN initiative a real dialogue.

5 Impact

5.1 Introduction

This chapter analyses the impact of the results towards reaching the desired specific and overall objectives:

5.2 Specific Objectives:

5.2.1 Specific Objective 1 & 2

- SO1. Continue to promote and develop a robust dialogue mechanism, at European Level, between civil society and EU institutions on conflict prevention and peace building issues.
- SO2. Continue contributing to the improvement of internal co-operation in post-conflict and post disaster recovery, and to influencing, mentoring and monitoring dialog at field level including through exploring the possibilities of applying the model of the CSDN on a regional basis.

After six years of CSDN activity, it can firmly be said that a robust civil society dialogue mechanism is in place and is embedded within relevant EU institutions. On the one hand, even officials who a few years ago were “almost allergic¹⁴” to the idea of civil society involvement in strategic planning are now understanding the importance and benefits of such a dialogue and use the CSDN regularly to make it happen.

On the other hand, CSOs no longer understand the EU as a “strange animal, which they either fear or milk”¹⁵ but as a powerful partner, that could potentially help them implement their agenda and achieve their mission and vision.

CSOs’ positions indeed find their way into EU strategies¹⁶, etc. even if it is not always easily traceable. Firstly, such inputs are diluted due to the long and complex EU decision-making process and, secondly, sensitive issues are often considered confidential and classified.

5.2.2 Specific Objective 3

- SO3. Continue support for co-ordination, policy and networking functions of EPLO at European level, to allow maintenance and further development of the current CSDN, inclusive of all interested non-state actors in peace-building related fields.

EPLO has benefited from six years of CSDN in terms of capacity building and empowerment. The CSDN has greatly benefitted from EPLO’s experience, network and membership. To date, EU institutions almost “automatically” call on EPLO to use the CSDN when they identify a need to dialogue with civil society on peace and conflict issues.

For EPLO there are many potential opportunities ahead to use this capacity and influence for the benefit of its members and partners. Changes the EU (e.g. Brexit), EU-institutions and – policies are imminent within the near future and these are likely to affect or concern CSOs in several ways (e.g. post-2020 scenarios, general and specific budget cuts, etc.) Stakeholders feel that EPLO could use the capacity and momentum of the CSDN process to be more proactive in this regard. On the one hand, this could be done to a certain extent by using the CSDN directly as a tool. On the other hand, EPLO has built up sufficient capacity to follow such an agenda in parallel and beyond the CSDN if necessary and appropriate.

It is therefore recommended that EPLO uses the influence and momentum of the CSDN for further capacity building to develop strategies in parallel and beyond the CSDN itself.

5.3 Overall Objective

The overall objective of the CSDN project is: *“to contribute to the EU and civil society capacity to prevent and respond to threats to stability and human development posed by violent conflict and crisis.”*

The project clearly meets its main objective of filling the communication gap between the relevant EU institutions and CSOs in Europe as well as in crisis-affected countries. Almost all stakeholders interviewed expressed the view that the project is “achieving its objectives”.

¹⁴ As one interviewee expressed it.

¹⁵ As expressed by another interviewee.

¹⁶ E.g.: It has been reported from the IcSP’s side, that outcomes from CSDN Funding Instruments Meetings are directly reflected in Annual Action Programmes.

There is broad agreement among stakeholders that there is an impact of the CSDN initiatives on the peacebuilding and crisis response policy developments of the EU institutions and their national counterparts in Member states. Equally, there is no doubt that the capacity, effectiveness and self-confidence of CSOs is strengthened significantly when their voices are heard by key decision makers in EU institutions and beyond. However, the extent to which the project's activities really have an impact on changing/ improving EU/EU-Member states policies is not quantifiable and, in any case, beyond the direct influence and mandate of the CSDN.

6 Sustainability

There are two levels of sustainability to be considered:

- Sustainability of EPLO and CSDN initiatives and outputs
- Sustainability of the Impact

6.1 Sustainability of EPLO and CSDN initiatives and outputs

EPLO as a platform and as an organisation existed before the CSDN and is likely to exist after the end of it. It has a broad membership and is funded by membership fees as well as occasionally by external donors for specific projects/activities. In any case and beyond doubt, the EU funding raised the level of activities significantly. There is a common understanding that a continuation of the CSDN with EPLO would be useful and justified. At the time of this evaluation, Phase III was already agreed in principle and even a CSDN IV does not appear unlikely from today's point of view, given the success of the project and the fact that hardly any alternative approaches to deliver/achieve similar services, outputs and outcomes are available.

The grant was awarded directly to EPLO outside the scope of a call for proposals. This was and is justified due to the fact that there is currently no other organisation or platform in place within the EU's periphery with a comparable mandate and/or member-base.

Nevertheless, the question was already raised under CSDN's Phase I whether this ongoing support to EPLO (without going through a competitive selection process) creates a monopoly for it and its member organisations and whether or to what extent the agreement discriminates other organisations. The question is valid. However, in this case, the danger of creating a monopoly to the disadvantage of other player(s) is considered minor at this stage, mainly for the following reasons:

- Currently, there is no direct "competitor" for EPLO that could be discriminated or disadvantaged. It is understood that there are similar platforms cooperating with UN agencies based in Geneva and New York but not around Brussels and the EU. Other platforms such as Brussels-based CONCORD are mainly concentrating on other sectors such as relief and development issues.
- The current approach and praxis does not exclude non-EPLO members from getting invited and participating in CSDN activities.
- The role and mandate of EPLO and CSDN aims to build capacity within CSOs to deal with EU institutions directly on various issues. Consequently, the more successful EPLO is in this attempt, the less likely it is to create a monopoly for itself as an exclusive hub between CSOs and EU institutions.

Beyond doubt, EPLO has become quite "powerful" in its position to fill the gap between the EU, EPLO members and other CSOs. Accordingly, it is important that EPLO continues involving a wide range of CSOs in the CSDN in order to build their capacity for EU advocacy, and continue promoting/encouraging further direct contacts between CSOs and EU institutions outside the CSDN.

To date, there is no financial/economic phase-out strategy for the CSDN. In case the EU funding comes to an end, EPLO will scale down in size and activities to a level which can be maintained with EPLO's own funds or EPLO will look for alternative external funding.

In such a scenario, EPLO would continue with its work and activities (within the frame of the smaller budget). However, it would obviously have to scale down in terms of staff and it would lose to a significant extent “the ability to fly people in”. Regarding this, it is suggested that EPLO also explores alternatives, such as increasing the use of up-to-date communication technologies, such as video-conferencing systems, etc. to replace Brussels-based meeting to a certain extent. (It is, of course, understood that such video-meetings would obviously “not be the same”. Firstly, a lot of value-adding of meetings happens outside the actual working session, in lunch- or tea-breaks, etc. Secondly, sensitive issues would not be discussed openly if people would fear (for good reasons) that external parties could hack the conversation. Thirdly, technical requirements, such a sufficient internet speed may not be available in developing countries.)

6.2 Potential sustainability of the impact

As discussed above, it is difficult to assess the extent to which the project's activities have a genuine impact on changing/improving EU/EU Member States policies. This is not quantifiable and, in any case, beyond the direct influence and mandate of the CSDN. Consequently, the potential sustainability of this direct impact cannot be anticipated.

In any case, what will last beyond the lifespan of the project is a culture of dialogue between CSOs and the EU.

On one side, EU institutions are used to the idea of using CSOs as an important source of information and local wisdom and EU officials and decision-makers appreciate to a large extent the input and cooperation from the CSOs' side. This process, which was and is enabled and consolidated by the CSDN, is hardly reversible. On the other side, CSOs will keep on demanding that their voices are heard by national and EU decision-makers and NGOs have increased their capacity to get access to them.

7 Cross-Cutting Issues

EPLO's and consequently CSDN's core efforts are to a large extent closely and directly related to cross-cutting issues, including good governance and human rights. The CSDN is implementing initiatives to build bridges and networks between peacebuilding and conflict prevention on one side and cross-cutting issues such as gender, development and environmental issues on the other side.

“Gender” is especially high on the agenda of both the EU and CSOs and therefore also integrated in the CSDN. A number of CSDN meetings looking particularly at gender issues have been organised under CSDN II (e.g.: in 2015: Refreshing Indicators for the EU's Women, Peace and Security Policy; Masculinity and Violence: How Do Gender Identities Relate to Violent Conflict? And in 2017: How to make the peace processes in Ukraine more inclusive?) In addition, for most meetings there was a specific effort to ensure the presence of gender experts in the room (e.g. The CSDN meeting on SSR; the CSDN meetings on the strategic reviews of CSDP missions; all geographic meetings, etc.) The regular CSDN reporting features gender-disaggregated data on participants prominently in chapter 1 (which is creditable but gives relatively little information on nature, target or impact of meetings in terms of gender-related issues).

So far, the CSDN's agenda (and capacity) regarding issues related to environmental degradation and climate change is relatively vague. It is recommended to invest more thoughts towards this direction, since it is foreseeable that these issues will be closely connected to conflicts and conflict prevention in the mid-term future.

8 Overall Conclusions, Recommendations & Lessons Learned

8.1 Overall Conclusion:

The CSDN is certainly a success. CSDN II overcame most of the teething problems identified in Phase I. To date, the project fulfils to a very large extent the expectations of partners and beneficiaries and contributes significantly towards its objectives.

Consequently, it is recommended to continue with the initiative and to implement the CSDN Phase III if possible without a gap from 1 April 2017 onwards. Stakeholders expect “more of the same” rather than radical changes in the approach. Nevertheless, a few recommendations are made below.

8.2 Lessons learned, observations & recommendations:

CSDN-specific: (Short-term to be considered for CSDN III)

Observation regarding in-country and Member State meetings: Most of the stakeholders, who have been asked about the relevance and feasibility of in-country meetings started their answer with “*it depends.....*”. Nevertheless, it was widely agreed that that such in-country meetings are interesting and useful, even if it is understood that implementing them raises various additional challenges.

Recommendation: Despite all difficulties, consider increasing the number of in-country meetings. It is recommended (if appropriate), to consider combinations, doing Brussels-meetings as well as in-country meetings on the same topic to achieve broader outreach.

Observation regarding preparation & briefing of participants: Preparation & briefing of and discussion with CSO participants have been praised by participants (especially from the EU institutions’ side) as one of the strengths of CSDN meetings. On the other side, some CSO participants mentioned that EU officials who are not directly involved in the organisation of the meetings appear sometimes less prepared and briefed than their CSO counterparts.

Recommendation: It is understood that officials from EU institutions are have a lot on their agenda and may not always find the time for more preparation or reading. Nevertheless, consider strategies to ensure better preliminary preparation for EU participants prior to the meetings.

Observation regarding monitoring of outcomes and/or impact of meetings and feedback to participants: Several stakeholders mentioned that there was room for improvement in terms of monitoring of outcomes and/or impact of meetings and related feedback to CSO participants. It is widely understood that such a monitoring or assessment of impact/outcome of CSDN events is not easy and it varies significantly according to the type of meeting and issues discussed. Participants invest considerable time and efforts in CSDN meetings but it is, in most cases, difficult for them to see the “success”. (“so what.....?”).

Recommendation: Consider ways to improve monitoring of meeting outcomes. It is understood that this will require dedicated resources. One suggestion is to choose “pilot-meetings” across the various categories and introduce monitoring throughout the entire cycle from the planning phase until several months after the event (incl. feedback to participants). This would enable assessing whether, to which extent, and for which categories, it is appropriate and feasible to develop and roll out full M&E.

CSO/EPLO-specific (Mid-term)

Observation regarding post-2020 strategies: Changes within the EU (e.g. Brexit), EU institutions and policies are expected in the near future and these changes are likely to affect or concern CSOs in several ways (e.g. post-2020-scenarios, general and specific budget-cuts, etc.). Stakeholders feel that EPLO could use the capacity and momentum of the CSDN process to be more proactive in this regard. Nevertheless, any project comes to an end sooner or later.

Recommendation: Consider opportunities and strategies to become more proactive in raising the voice of EPLO members and CSOs in order to influence the EU's "post 2020 agenda" and other concepts and strategies timely and meaningfully. On the one hand, this could be done to a certain extent by using the CSDN directly as a tool. On the other hand, EPLO has built up sufficient capacity to follow such an agenda in parallel and beyond the CSDN if necessary and appropriate.


ANNEXES

ANNEX 1: List of persons interviewed/consulted

ANNEX 2: Terms of Reference

ANNEX 1: List of persons interviewed/consulted

Name	Institution/Organisation	
Babaud Sébastien	European Commission	
Beswick Terri	EPLO (and former EEAS staff)	
Colchester Felix	Conciliation Resources	
Cogitore Colin	EPLO	
Conti Lorenzo	EPLO	
Cremonini Giovanni	EEAS	
Gatt Rutter Karin	EEAS	
Gunduz Canan	EEAS	
Harrisson Guy	EEAS	
Hazelzet Hadewych	EEAS	
Hruby Dana	Oxfam Novib	
Kouvo Sari	Gothenburg University (and former EEAS staff)	
Kundt Ramona	EPLO	
Lane Andrew	Quaker Council for European Affairs	
Levit-Shore Sarah	Former EPLO Senior Associate	
Mac Aongusa Ronan	European Commission	
Mestres Brugada Ramon	EEAS	
Moore Ben	EPLO	
Penfrat Anna	EPLO	
Reines-Djivanides Sonya	EPLO	
Rougy Nicolas	Interpeace	
Sbai Najoua	EPLO	
Thapa Rashmi	Peace Matters / Search for Common Ground	
Tricot O'Farrell Kloe	Saferworld	

 interviewed on phone or skype

ANNEX 2: Terms of Reference

Terms of Reference: Evaluation – Civil Society Dialogue Network Project

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 funded by the European Commission. The CSDN contributes to strengthening EU and civil society capacity to anticipate, analyse, prevent and respond to threats to stability and human development posed by violent conflict and crisis. EPLO organises CSDN meetings which are open to all interested civil society actors and take place in Brussels, EU Member States and conflict-affected countries with EU presence. The CSDN discusses policy, strategic and programming aspects of the EU's response to conflict, transversal thematic issues relating to peacebuilding and crisis-specific situations.

Purpose of the Interim Evaluation

The CSDN project has been operating since 2010. The second phase of the project will end in March 2017. The purpose of the Evaluation is to provide a deep and comprehensive evaluation of the results of the project and lessons to be applied in the next phase of the project.

Specific objectives:

- To identify the results of the CSDN project so far
- To assess the management of the CSDN project by the European Peacebuilding Liaison Office (EPLO)
- To identify any challenges in the implementation of the project
- To list recommendations for improvement of the CSDN

The evaluation will be conducted in accordance with the EuropeAid evaluation guidelines.

Outputs

The consultant will provide an evaluation report of maximum 20 pages (excluding Annexes) including a one-page executive summary of key findings. The evaluation report should include sections that reflect four objectives listed above, plus any relevant additional sections.

Delivery

Fieldwork in Brussels is scheduled for the 20th of February to the 3rd of March 2017.

The first draft of the report will be provided to EPLO no later than 8 March 2017.

Any changes and amendments based on comments received by EPLO, should be made by 15 March 2017.

Activities

The evaluator should use the findings of interviews and analysis already carried out in the evaluation of the CSDN project, including interim reports provided to the European Commission, consultations with participants in CSDN events, interviews with key

stakeholders, including EU policy-makers and civil society representatives, the findings of the ROM Mission evaluation, and minutes of the Project Oversight Group meetings, including reviews of CSDN activities.

In addition, the evaluator will carry out the following activities:

- In depth interviews with key stakeholders in civil society and EU institutions (From 20 February to 3 March 2017)
- Analysis of CSDN documents, including official project documents, CSDN reports, and background documents for CSDN meetings.

Terms and Conditions: please see contract. Payment will be provided conditional on timely delivery of the evaluation report.