



Civil Society Dialogue Network Geographic Meeting

Conflict Dynamics and Peace Drivers in the Lake Chad Region: Exchange of views with the EU

Thursday 10 October 2019, Brussels

Meeting Report

Background

The overall objective of this Civil Society Dialogue Network (CSDN) Geographic Meeting was to gather civil society input on conflict dynamics and peace drivers in the Lake Chad region and, more specifically, for civil society actors to have an exchange of views with EU officials on regional policies and dynamics, short- and long-term issues, local and regional actors, and the role of civil society.

The meeting brought together approximately 40 participants, including representatives of civil society organisations (CSOs) from or working on the Lake Chad region, and officials from both the European Commission (EC) and the European External Action Service (EEAS). Discussions were held under the Chatham House Rule.

This report includes the key points and recommendations which were expressed in the meeting. They may not be attributed to any participating individual or organisation, nor do they necessarily represent the views of all the meeting participants, the European Peacebuilding Liaison Office (EPLO) and its member organisations, or the EU institutions.

Key Findings and Recommendations for EU Engagement in the Lake Chad Region

- Both governments of the countries in the Lake Chad Region and the international community tend to prioritise security-oriented solutions to the Lake Chad conflict, even though several issues stem from widespread poverty, lack of opportunities for local populations, and the destruction of livelihoods. Due to the nature of these issues, the EU should focus its efforts and funding more on development and peacebuilding, rather than simply on security issues.
- The needs of the most affected groups, including women, young people, internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees, and former combatants are not sufficiently taken into consideration in the peacebuilding, development and humanitarian work which is undertaken by international actors. The international community, including the EU, should therefore adopt a more inclusive approach to ensure that all relevant actors are included and that their needs are addressed. In those cases in which local ownership has been established, activities have been more effective in targeting the needs of the different populations.
- Local CSOs' activities in the region are hindered by their lack of resources and capacities to access funding from international donors. Building on positive existing examples, the EU should provide more funding to CSOs and support capacity building programmes.

- Conflicting relations with governments represent another obstacle for local civil society. Governments are suspicious about CSOs' activities and counter-terrorism laws often end up overtly impeding – if not altogether preventing – CSOs from carrying out their work. The EU should work with governments in order to create an enabling environment for civil society, and support dialogue between CSOs and governmental authorities, including the military and security forces.
- CSOs also struggle to work with their counterparts in neighbouring countries. In this sense, further opportunities for exchange among civil society are also needed.
- Abuses, violence, and bad practices have contributed to widespread mistrust of the population vis-à-vis national security forces. The EU should work with governments and their security forces to reinforce good practices (e.g. accountability, transparency, etc.) and to support training programmes on human rights and international humanitarian law (IHL).
- Low levels of education, combined with a lack of jobs, opportunities, and access to livelihoods makes young people particularly vulnerable to radical narratives and recruitment by extremist groups. In order to address this, further support for education programmes aiming to inform the youth on social and economic opportunities, livelihood accessibility, and alternatives to extremist groups are needed.
- Fragile groups, including children and IDPs, victims and former combatants, are also in critical need of psychosocial support.
- Women are particularly hit by the conflict, and victims are often stigmatised in their community. For this, the EU should support economic empowerment and education for women as a tool for social reintegration. At the same time, it is important to consider that women can also play a role as perpetrators of violence and recruiters for extremist groups.
- Economic opportunities and education are key to ensuring that former combatants can effectively reintegrate into society. This not only includes Boko Haram but, in the long term, also those individuals who are currently part of vigilante groups. Effective reintegration practices also require patient work with host communities in order to address the concerns and needs of the victims, in particular regarding their own safety.
- Engaging with religious and community leaders is crucial for their capacity to mobilise people and exchange information, and it represents both a risk and a challenge. International actors, including the EU, should identify the right leaders to engage with at different stages, while being wary of the risks associated with them. Work on interfaith dialogue can also represent an opportunity to engage on a regional level, including on geopolitical issues, such as funding from global actors to specific religious schools.
- The EU should promote a more strategic use of communication as this has proven effective in countering extreme narratives and educating people on specific issues, including climate change.
- Due to the complexity of the dynamics in the Lake Chad conflicts, the EU should also ensure that more co-operation and coordination among humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding actors takes place through dialogue among practitioners on the so-called 'Triple Nexus' at the local level.
- The international community, including the EU, should ensure that all activities, especially in the areas of trade, humanitarian aid, and local civil society capacity building are conflict-sensitive.
- In a post-conflict context, it will be crucial to ensure that transitional justice is inclusive and locally-owned. In order to achieve this, the international community, including the EU, will have to ensure that local traditional forms of transitional justice are also taken into account.

- Due to the common nature of the challenges and conflict dynamics which affect the four countries in the Lake Chad region, the EU should step up its regional engagement.

Drivers of conflict in the Lake Chad region

Participants described the similarities in conflict issues and dynamics which affect the four countries of the Lake Chad region (i.e. Chad, Niger, Northeast Nigeria and North Cameroon). Several years of violence resulting from the conflict between non-state armed groups (e.g. Boko Haram) and military forces have impacted negatively on the lives of millions, in a region which is already affected by poverty, political fragility, food insecurity and climate change.

Several participants highlighted the issue of IDPs and refugees, which are present in varying numbers in all four countries. The large number of individuals who are forced to leave their homes due to the violence is putting a strain on available resources and, fuelling tensions between IDPs and host communities. The efforts and resources which have been put in place by public authorities and the international community to manage this problem have not been sufficient, and people living in the large IDP camps often lack basic services and suffer the effects of recurrent epidemics. Some participants also highlighted how the difficulties in the management of those camps creates space for Boko Haram recruiters to act.

Participants agreed that together with low levels of education, the lack of livelihood opportunities and economic alternatives has been the main reason why violent extremist narratives have found fertile ground among the populations of the Lake Chad region, and non-state armed groups such as Boko Haram have been able to recruit members easily, especially young people.

Despite many people thinking this, participants argued that the governments of the four countries in the Lake Chad region have largely ignored the developmental nature of the crisis and the needs of the affected populations. According to the participants, their action focuses merely on security, reverting to military intervention as the only strategy to fight non-state armed groups. Moreover, some argued that public authorities have failed to acknowledge – and consequently address – the humanitarian consequences of such strategies.

Participants stressed the fact that, in general, central governments from the four countries struggle to exert authority on the Lake Chad region. The public resources which are allocated to these areas are very limited and the few existing services are largely ineffective. One participant even went as far as to state that the mere existence of certain villages was unknown to the central government before the Boko Haram crisis. This lack of governance creates more room for non-state actors and illicit activities which, in turn, can lead to further instability and tensions in the region.

The four countries also face similar challenges concerning the reintegration of former combatants of non-state armed groups and the rehabilitation of victims. Participants argued that local communities are generally unwilling to accept returnees, both due to mistrust of the individuals and the stigma associated with the families of former combatants. They also underlined the lack of psychosocial support for victims – especially women – whose rehabilitation process is not sufficiently supported by the government. In that sense, participants agreed that more work on social cohesion should be undertaken.

Participants also emphasised the complex nature of societies in the Lake Chad region, in which community and religious leaders play a major role. In this context, some participants argued that there was not enough space for dialogue and interaction among such actors, and they are not sufficiently taken into consideration by the international actors. One participant argued that they represent both a valuable resource and a risk due to the influence which they wield on specific community groups and their ability to spread information.

Participants also described the difficult situation which local civil society actors face. In general, local non-governmental organisations (NGOs) suffer from a lack of funding and capacity, and that this is an issue which is often neglected by international donors. Some participants argued that donors earmark too much funding for institutional actors and that local CSOs often lack the capacity to respond to their calls for proposals. Some also argued that projects are mostly tailored towards international NGOs and do not sufficiently reflect the skills and needs of local communities. Additionally, one participant argued that INGOs often attract the most capable staff, thus reducing the capacities of local CSOs. In general, participants agree that there is not enough coordination between international donors and civil society in the four countries.

Civil society in the four countries in the Lake Chad region is also struggling due to a conflictual relationship with governments and security forces. Participants described how the governments generally view civil society with suspicion – if not in an overtly hostile manner – and tend not to take it into consideration in decision-making processes. Some remarked how recently-adopted counter-terrorism laws ended up obstructing or even preventing both local and international NGOs from operating in the region. However, they also remarked that the lack of co-operation between governments and civil society is related to the widespread mistrust of the military by local people which stem from abuses which have been committed by security forces on civilians. For this reason, local CSOs often choose not to engage with military actors in order to avoid the potential negative implications of being associated with them.

Due to the common issues which affect the four countries, all participants agree on the need for increased engagement from a regional standpoint. Initiatives such as the Lake Chad Basin Commission, and the Lake Chad Governors' Forum were welcomed, but doubts persisted on their usefulness and the willingness of the governments of the four countries to implement the commitments which were made in such fora. One participant highlighted the need to pay more attention to the non-institutional actors such as religious leaders, traders and informal chambers of commerce who operate regionally.

Participants also underlined that the four countries in the Lake Chad region are affected by other common challenges which are not directly linked with the Boko Haram crisis. For example, the destruction of livelihoods has contributed to the development of criminal and illicit economies, including thefts, kidnappings, and human trafficking.

Finally, participants noted that the Lake Chad region is also extremely affected by climate change and natural resources are already under severe pressure. In the long term, the management of natural resources will become an even more crucial issue and driver of conflict.

Drivers of conflicts in each of the four countries

Participants highlighted the specificities of the contexts in each of the four countries in the Lake Chad region.

Chad

One participant from Chad argued that there was a strong mistrust by the population vis-à-vis the government. This was derived from the chronic absence of governance in the areas affected by the Lake Chad conflict, and from the lack of transparency and incorrect information which had been provided by the government regarding the fight against Boko Haram (i.e. the government considers it to have been resolved whereas the group is actually gaining ground).

Participants argued that the deployment of the Chadian army has done more harm than good to local people as it has led to an increase in the levels of violence. The government also seem to be adamant about pursuing a military strategy without consulting the population, as they view the current crisis exclusively through a security spectrum – and therefore relating to the sovereignty of the state – and not as a developmental and/or humanitarian issue. In addition, one participant argued that the army is not ready to fight asymmetrical warfare and has therefore had limited success so far.

Participants highlighted that the relations between civil society and the government are compromised. State authorities are hostile towards civil society: they consider CSOs as a threat rather than potential partners. For this reason, civil society space is extremely limited. According to one participant, the government is also intentionally hiding information on the ongoing conflicts (e.g. the number of casualties) from the population and is essentially using the army as an instrument for the repression of dissent rather than the protection of citizens.

Participants stressed that climate change and the limited availability of resources – most notably the shrinking waters of the Lake Chad – represent another major issue in the region and are aggravating social tensions.

Niger

Participants from Niger explained that, compared to the other countries in the Lake Chad region, the Nigerien authorities are quite collaborative with civil society. However, they underlined that the co-operation between civil society and the government has had limited success so far. In addition, the presence of the State in the Diffa region, which is located more than 1300 km away from Niamey and connected by a single road, is very weak and, as a result, there is a serious lack of central government control.

Participants explained that inter-community tensions are increasing and are fuelled by the growing pressure on the already scarce available natural resources due to the presence of a large number of IDPs and refugees. The region is also severely affected by climate change. One participant described how droughts and floods devastate crops and force people to move to Maiduguri.

One participant stressed how social tensions are also a consequence of the lack of conflict sensitivity in the distribution of aid by the international community. Parts of the population who are not beneficiaries tend to become hostile towards IDPs, refugees and other recipients of international aid. Participants also highlighted how aid packages are often seized by Boko Haram

or criminal gangs, or sold by the beneficiaries. This raises questions about the extent to which aid is properly targeted.

The difficult situation of the population and increasing social tensions have led to the emergence of new criminal activities which were not present in the region before. Thefts, drug consumption, and arms proliferation have become ordinary, especially amongst young people who are most severely affected by the lack of legal livelihood opportunities.

Attempts to encourage co-operation between civil society and the Nigerien army have been undertaken with the help of the international community, including the EU. However, people's trust in the army is low due to episodes of abuses committed by the military under the state of emergency.

Cameroon

Participants from Cameroon argued that, after having peaked in 2015, the number of attacks committed by Boko Haram against the population has decreased, but that the situation remains critical. Boko Haram remains able to recruit and spread its narratives easily due to the widespread poverty and lack of livelihood alternatives which exist. Participants also explained that calm periods alternate with more dangerous ones depending on rainfall seasonality.

One participant argued that civil society in the Far North Region was almost non-existent before the advent of Boko Haram and that it had developed in response to it. However, local NGOs are not seen favourably by the government, who perceive them as a threat and attempt to limit their space to act. Their capacities and access to funding opportunities are also very limited, and external support is weak.

Participants argued that local people have mixed feelings towards military forces. On the one hand, they appreciate the role that they play in fighting Boko Haram but, on the other hand, there is growing mistrust following episodes of human rights abuses and rampant corruption in the recruitment of troops. In addition, the government has deployed a large number of troops in Southwest Cameroon in order to address the Anglophone Crisis which started in 2017. This has inevitably shifted attention away from the Far North Region which has, in turn, left more room for Boko Haram incursions and increased local people's hostility vis-à-vis the army.

One participant stated that a lot of public resources were used to increase the media attention on a few initiatives on the reintegration of former Boko Haram combatants at the expense of other issues, including funding for local civil society and psychosocial support for people affected by the conflict.

Participants also cited examples of interfaith dialogues between Christian and Muslim communities aimed at increasing social cohesion, and initiatives on training young imams locally in order to prevent them being influenced by foreign radical Quranic schools. One participant explained how inter-religious tensions were present in the early 2000s (i.e. before the emergence of Boko Haram). At the time, religious leaders were trained abroad (e.g. in Algeria and Saudi Arabia) and returned to Cameroon to preach radical forms of Islam.

Nigeria

Participants highlighted that the security situation in Northeast Nigeria had improved since the early days of the Boko Haram crisis but that serious discrepancies still existed between rural and urban areas. Major cities (e.g. Maiduguri) are relatively safe and protected by the army but attacks are still frequent in rural areas.

Participants stated that, since 2015, the government had developed a series of initiatives aimed at addressing violent extremism, and promoting reintegration and rehabilitation of former combatants. The EU and other international actors supported the Nigerian government in its efforts in these areas. However, the support was insufficient and the results were disappointing. Participants argued that this was mainly due to failures to take into consideration victims, community needs, and civil society views.

Participants warned that space for civil society and humanitarian actors was shrinking. INGOs and humanitarian actors are viewed negatively by local authorities in Borno State and the army overtly obstructs or even prevents their work. For instance, the army terminated the activities of some INGOs and accused them of supplying food and medicine to Boko Haram. One participant also explained that the Nigerian army imposed a limit on fuel consumption which also inhibited humanitarian actors from carrying out their activities. This, in turn, affected the lives of the large numbers of people who are dependent on humanitarian aid and the functioning of the large IDP camps in the region. Aid delivery and distribution has also been hindered by the fact that humanitarian actors are unable to access some rural areas and face the constant risk of their aid being diverted by Boko Haram or bandit groups.

The relationship between local people and the army is also conflictual. One participant stated that troops lack training on human rights and knowledge on basic IHL, and that their activities endanger rather than protect local people. Another also stated that the army had seized large swathes of private land.

Participants stressed the need for civil society and international actors to engage with the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF) and other vigilante groups as their role in maintaining security in the region has given them both legitimacy in the eyes of local people and influence over the government. However, participants also cautioned that these groups have grievances against the government due to expected rewards for their work which have not been given and that they do not co-operate much with community leaders. One participant also stated that, once the insurgency ends, the question of the long-term reintegration of members of the various vigilante groups in the society will become highly relevant.

Finally, participants stressed the importance for international actors to engage with religious leaders and local traditional police groups despite their reluctance.

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 contributing to Stability and Peace). 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 third phase of the CSDN will last from 2017 to 2020. For more information, please visit the [EPLO website](#).