



Civil Society Dialogue Network Policy Meeting

Twenty years after the Gothenburg Programme on Conflict Prevention

What next for the EU as a Global Peace Actor?

Friday 17 September 2021

Meeting Report

Background

In June 2001, the European Council adopted the [EU Programme for the Prevention of Violent Conflicts](#), also known as the 'Gothenburg Programme'¹. This document was the first formal commitment to conflict prevention at EU level and shaped the development of EU external action in the following years. The 20th anniversary of the Gothenburg Programme provided an opportunity to reflect on the EU's engagement in conflict prevention and identify operational challenges for future EU external action.

The objective of the meeting was to provide space for an informal exchange on the EU's capacity as a global peace actor. The meeting brought together 43 participants, including senior EU officials from the European Commission (EC) and the European External Action Service (EEAS), representatives of EU Member States, a Member of the European Parliament, and the leadership of established peacebuilding civil society organisations (CSOs). 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.

Taking stock of the EU's strengths and weaknesses as a global peace actor

Participants agreed that the Gothenburg Programme adopted in 2001 was a milestone in establishing a first commitment to conflict prevention and peacebuilding (CPPB) in EU external action and allowed the EU to become a leader in CPPB worldwide. They acknowledged that since the adoption of the Programme, the EU has made considerable efforts to improve conflict prevention in its external action, including by making conflict analysis more systematic in its programming cycles, improving early warning, and enhancing coherence in the implementation of its policies in conflict-affected contexts.

The conflict analysis screening requirement for programming under the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI-Global Europe) was brought up as a clear example of positive development in this direction. One participant nuanced however that the EU's approach to conflict analysis could become more of a bureaucratic exercise, whereas the original ambition in promoting conflict analysis was to transform the way in which the EU understands its own position, engages with local and regional actors,

¹ Which *inter alia* welcomed the European Commission's [Communication on Conflict Prevention \(April 2001\)](#)

and looks at the potential unintended consequences of its actions to avoid doing harm and be more conflict-sensitive.

Participants explained that the community of peacebuilding practitioners has also evolved considerably in the last twenty years. CSOs have developed stronger partnerships with each other and improved their relationships with the EU institutions. CPPB work has become more sophisticated in response to the increased complexity of conflict dynamics and their connections with issues such as climate change, digitalisation and inequalities.

One particular constraint highlighted by a few participants was the political pressure on decision-makers to be seen to be doing something and act quickly in response to crises. This can sometimes lead to favouring militarised approaches, even if their shortcomings are well-known, notably because such approaches are more visible than CPPB efforts. However, it was acknowledged that despite this context, the EU institutions have also shown more political and bureaucratic ambition in recent years to increase their CPPB efforts.

The EU's added value in CPPB

One participant expressed frustration with the EU's slowness to react in crisis situations. However, others insisted that the EU's added value in CPPB lies in other elements: its commitment to engage in the long term; its convening power; its financial resources; its willingness to invest in conflict-affected countries and regions; its relative political neutrality; and its ability to combine these various assets – as the results of the external evaluations of EU support to CPPB [from 2001 to 2010](#) and [from 2013 to 2018](#) demonstrated. Most participants nevertheless agreed on the need for the EU to improve its swiftness in responding to early warning signs before all indicators turn red.

The EU's multilateral orientation in external action was also seen as supportive of strengthening CPPB efforts and a source of legitimacy for the EU as a global peace actor. Some participants underlined that this is particularly important in the current international context, in which multilateral approaches are losing ground to the benefit of individual initiatives by Member States or third countries.

The future of CPPB: upcoming challenges and opportunities

Participants highlighted that long-term developments such as climate change, digitalisation, and the fragmentation of authorities can affect conflicts in various ways. It was also argued that technology is changing rapidly, and conflicts today tend to evolve faster between the local to national and regional levels. This was attributed to the involvement of a larger number of external actors, leading to many proxy dynamics which did not exist twenty years ago. One participant also emphasised that digitalisation and in particular social media play an important role in the struggle of narratives between conflict parties, and considered that peacebuilders have been slow in catching up on technological innovations.

The role of for-profit private actors in conflict contexts was highlighted by one participant. They can often be very influential players in shaping politics and, by extension, the evolution of conflicts (e.g. Somalia) as a result of their increased presence. Another participant noted that the private sector is very large and unpacking the various intentions driving specific activities needs particular attention.

A participant explained that current conversations on localisation and decolonization are also impacting CPPB efforts and require innovation in the ways donors, including the EU, and international NGOs support locally-led peacebuilding efforts.

Enhancing the EU's contribution to CPPB

Participants presented a series of challenges for EU action in CPPB and suggested recommendations to improve its performance.

Internal coordination

While noting the challenges inherent to a complex bureaucracy, participants recommended that the EU should improve the coordination within its institutions, especially between departments and units responsible on the one hand for political decisions and on the other hand for the implementation of instruments and policies, as well as with Member States. A few participants insisted that enhanced coordination is particularly important when planning highly sensitive engagement, such as European Peace Facility (EPF) assistance measures.

Some participants observed a certain degree of disconnect between EU officials working in Brussels at the strategic level and staff in EU Delegations (EUEDEs) working at the operational level. It was noted that the knowledge of a given conflict situation is usually higher in EUEDEs and the EU should therefore allocate more resources and responsibilities to the staff working in third countries to design better conflict-sensitive policies and instruments.

From conflict analysis to action

The ways in which the EU currently undertakes conflict analysis was also discussed. One participant noted that while some conflict analyses are carried out in a very methodical way, others are carried out more informally, and this depends on the nature of the EU officials in charge. Participants stressed that the EU should further its efforts to ensure conflict analysis is properly mainstreamed in EU decision-making and policy implementation, so that it is conducted more systematically and becomes part of the EU's institutional culture, while one person identified confirmation biases as the biggest challenge for EU conflict analysis going forward.

Several participants also called on the EU to ensure that the quality of its analysis is constantly improving and is translated into action, by dedicating more human and financial resources to it. Some warned of the risk of complacency and insisted that conflict analyses should be more adaptive to the changing nature of conflicts by being more meaningfully inclusive and dynamic, including by paying more attention to the role of women and young people in preventing conflicts.

The insurgency in Cabo Delgado illustrated how, despite clear early warning signs, the EU can react with a certain delay to a rising crisis. It was recommended that in order to remain a leader in conflict prevention, the EU should increase efforts to bridge the gap between early warning and early action, while maintaining a long-term focused approach.

Since the ability to conduct robust conflict analyses depends greatly on exchanges with local stakeholders (including local CSOs active in the least accessible areas), one participant recommended that the EU should further invest in strengthening local capacity for conflict analysis, including that of local authorities and CSOs. It was also suggested that the EU should do more to ensure that conflict analyses not only inform strategies and policies at the macro level, but also influence rapid-response actions at the micro-level.

Partnerships

Participants emphasised the importance of partnerships between the EU and CSOs for effective CPPB. Civil society was described as a valuable partner in implementation, as well as a critical sounding board for EU CPPB policies. One participant particularly highlighted that the advocacy efforts conducted by civil society have been key in maintaining CPPB on the EU's political agenda, and that further engagement with the EU institutions will be required to encourage its uptake. Current megatrends shaping conflicts (e.g., climate change and digitalisation) could be used as entry points by CSOs to make the case for CPPB and raise awareness on the concept of conflict sensitivity to policymakers who are not familiar with it.

It was also suggested that increased co-operation between EU institutions and local partners, especially CSOs, would improve the collection of information for conflict analysis, and that more exchange on respective conflict analysis approaches can create common understandings and harmonisations in practices.

When the actions of the EU are not entirely in line with the United Nations and other regional organisations' (e.g., the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), and the African Union), there is a risk that CPPB measures may be less effective and even harmful. To avoid this, participants insisted that the EU should work more closely and strategically with other partners, especially via EUDELs in third countries.

One participant also suggested that the EU should increase its ability to communicate about its CPPB efforts, which could help clarify the EU's position on a given context and therefore facilitate dialogue with other actors. Another participant argued that the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and other EU leaders should emphasise more the role of the EU as a global peace actor. For example, more visible statements on relevant policies, such as the EU Concept for Peace Mediation, would help to counterbalance the narrative of the EU as a 'global security provider'.

Knowledge management and institutional culture

Knowledge management remains an issue in EU external action, particularly due to the high turnover of staff in EUDELs and in Brussels. Some participants suggested an increase in training on CPPB and 'do no harm', in particular for the Heads of EUDEL, and stressed the need to work on procedures for human resources, including staff evaluations, in order to incentivise EU staff to report critically on the unintended consequences of EU actions on conflict dynamics. These participants also highlighted that the political and senior leadership have a crucial role in inducing such a change of institutional culture from the top of the hierarchy.

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 fourth phase of the CSDN will last from 2020 to 2023. For more information, please visit the [EPLO website](#).