



## **Civil Society Dialogue Network Geographic Meeting**

### **Conflict dynamics and peace drivers in the Horn of Africa in the context of the Covid-19 crisis: Gathering civil society input**

Wednesday 3 June 2020, Online

#### **MEETING REPORT**

This Civil Society Dialogue Network (CSDN) Geographic Meeting (GM) took place on 3 June 2020 online. It brought together 13 representatives of international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) and 20 officials from the European Commission (EC), the European External Action Service (EEAS) and the Office of the EU Special Representative (EUSR) for the Horn of Africa (HoA). The overall objective of the meeting was for EU officials and INGO representatives to reflect and exchange on the peace and security situation in the HoA in the context of the Covid-19 crisis.

As the meeting was held under the Chatham House Rule, the views expressed may not be attributed to any participating individual or institution nor do they necessarily represent the views of all of the meeting participants, the European Peacebuilding Liaison Office (EPLO) and its member organisations, or the co-organisers.

INGO participants raised the following issues and made the following recommendations:

- The Covid-19 crisis has had and will continue to have a negative impact on conflict dynamics in the HoA. While most of the issues have regional implications, some countries might experience specific difficulties.
- Since the Covid-19 crisis is likely to divert financial and human resources away from addressing climate issues, conflict dynamics resulting from the climate crisis will probably be exacerbated.
- The need to tackle Covid-19 has strengthened the role of HoA governments. This has the potential to undermine the limited progress on civic participation which has taken place in recent years, and to encourage corruption at all levels due to the consequent reduction in the accountability of public authorities.
- Covid-19 is also being used as an excuse by HoA governments to crack down on human rights and fundamental freedoms, especially as several countries are preparing for elections. Electoral violence is causing more deaths than the pandemic but it remains largely unreported.
- The economic consequences of measures which have been put in place to tackle Covid-19 are magnifying existing inequalities and injustices in the HoA. Unemployment is increasing, especially among young people. Localised episodes of extreme violence related to land issues have been recorded in the whole region. In addition, the economic impacts of the Covid-19 crisis in other countries has substantially reduced the volume of remittances from abroad on which millions of people in the HoA depend.
- The situation of migrant and internally displaced persons (IDPs) remains a major issue in the HoA, especially on the Somali-Kenyan border. The number of migrants and IDPs is likely to increase as a result of the economic consequences of the Covid-19 crisis and this will add to the pressure on host communities.
- Since many people have become unemployed and a large number of children have dropped out of education, women have taken on more responsibilities in households. However, data show that levels of gender-based violence and domestic violence against children have increased sharply since the beginning of the crisis.
- The Covid-19 crisis has had a dramatic impact on the funding available to local NGOs in the HoA and this, in turn, has affected their operations. A reduction in international donors' investment in peacebuilding will put further pressure on these NGOs which are generally already

in difficult economic situations. It will also have a negative impact on mediation activities and the implementation of existing peace processes.

- The combination of a general deterioration in the economic situation and an increased sense of hopelessness among populations in HoA countries makes it easier for al-Shabaab and other armed groups to recruit members and spread their narratives.
- There has been an escalation of violence in the Mandera triangle since the beginning of the Covid-19 crisis. In Kenya, conflicts have increased both in areas on the Somali border and in the Rift Valley province. Debates on Covid-19 in Kenya have been strongly politicised and have created further divisions in an already very fragmented society.
- In addition to exacerbating existing tensions and security concerns in Somalia, the Covid-19 crisis is also overshadowing important political processes including oil licensing and a law on NGOs which could have considerable implications for accountability, humanitarian access and human rights.
- The Covid-19 crisis has halted progresses on the peace processes in Sudan and South Sudan. The number of attacks by armed groups which are not involved in the peace processes has increased and there has been a resurgence in inter-ethnic clashes and communal violence which had partially stopped.
- The drop in the price of oil has also deprived both the Sudanese and South Sudanese governments of crucial revenues, and this has made it more difficult for them to address the Covid-19 crisis and support the implementation of the peace processes. The inability of the two governments to act and the lack of civic participation in the decision-making process has further deteriorated the populations' trust in them.
- The Covid-19 crisis is also overshadowing developments in Eritrea, where the government has used the pandemic to strengthen its hold on power and curtail fundamental freedoms.
- The visible impacts of the Covid-19 crisis in the HoA serve to highlight the need for international actors and governments of the HoA countries to focus more on regional dynamics. The lack of harmony in the different countries' Covid-19 response strategies is having a negative impact on various issues, including border management, trade, food security and humanitarian activities.
- Due to its strong influence in region, the Intergovernmental Authority for Development (IGAD) could play a stronger role in coordinating the relations between the HoA countries and their responses to the Covid-19 crisis. The EU should work to empower IGAD and the African Union (AU) Commission so they can ensure that HoA countries' responses to the Covid-19 crisis are conflict-sensitive, inclusive and respectful of human rights. In addition, IGAD's role in supporting economic and political integration in the HoA is even more important now that the Covid-19 crisis has undone much of the progress towards the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).
- The United Nations Secretary-General's (UNSG) call for a global ceasefire has not been met with much enthusiasm in the HoA and it has even been dismissed as Western propaganda by some armed groups, including al-Shabaab. Although there have been some recent positive examples of effective mediation processes (e.g. developments in Galmudug), they are not linked to the Covid-19 crisis nor to the UNSG's call. Given the negative impact of the current crisis on conflict dynamics in the HoA, international actors, including the EU, should consider engaging with armed groups such as al-Shabaab.
- Misunderstandings, false rumours and misrepresentation of data have characterised information on Covid-19 in the HoA. Low levels of social media literacy have been exploited by extremist groups to strengthen recruitment and spread violent narratives. In addition, large parts of the populations of HoA countries do not have internet access so traditional media (e.g. radio) are still required for the dissemination of accurate information.

#### **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](#).