



Civil Society Dialogue Network Policy Meeting

How can peacebuilding actors counter disinformation? Perspectives from civil society

Introductory Meeting

Tuesday 29 June 2021

MEETING REPORT

In the first part of the discussion, civil society participants were asked to explain how disinformation affects their organisations' work in conflict-affected countries and regions.

They made the following points:

- Although it is possible to identify some general trends in the development and spread of disinformation, it is mostly highly context-dependent. As such, it is important to analyse and understand local contexts, including the key actors.
- Disinformation is amplifying existing conflict dynamics.
- Although disinformation is not a new phenomenon, it is evolving very quickly. This necessitates faster responses and increased capacities to adapt to new technologies.
- Whilst social media are present in many conflict contexts, they are not always used as widely or trusted as much as traditional media. In many countries, the spread of disinformation via traditional media (e.g. radio) remains the most significant risk.
- In many countries, social media platforms (e.g. Facebook) are considered as an important source of factual information. Given that these platforms are also a source of disinformation, differentiating between the two can be a challenge for their users.
- Disinformation has become more targeted (e.g. trying to discourage women in Kenya, Nigeria and Palestine from receiving vaccinations).
- Influential figures, including politicians, are increasingly acting as disinformation 'super-spreaders' in certain countries (e.g. Burundi and Nigeria) by propagating disinformation both on- and offline.
- As the number of female representatives in democratic institutions increases, so does the extent to which they are the targets of disinformation from state institutions that aim to undermine their credibility.
- Disinformation undermines mediation processes.
- The terms 'disinformation' and 'fake news' are being increasingly weaponised by politicians in order to discredit messages that do not suit their agendas.
- Electoral processes are particularly prone to disinformation (e.g. deliberately misquoting politicians and deliberately sharing false information about the dates of elections or the location or opening hours of voting places).
- Disinformation can have particularly detrimental impacts in contexts in which trust in the government is already low. In these contexts, disinformation is often targeted at groups that are already marginalised.
- Disinformation thrives in polarised societies with fragile institutions.

- Various media are often the most visible embodiment of disinformation in a particular country but that disinformation is shaped by state- and non-state actors, including through school curricula and cultural institutions (e.g. theatre, cinema and literature).
- Social media platforms have a responsibility as actors in conflict contexts and it is important for peacebuilding actors to engage with them.
- It is advisable to avoid trying to combine communication campaigns with support to the media. Conflating campaigning and journalism is not effective in countering disinformation as it can increase confusion about the presentation of facts versus opinions.
- The COVID-19 crisis has highlighted the critical role of journalism in addressing disinformation. However, journalists' work is being undermined by new threats to their safety and restrictions to freedom of expression in the name of prohibiting false information. At the same time, social media companies are using opaque rules and algorithms to curb online disinformation on their platforms but they can sometimes over-regulate and threaten freedom of expression or under-regulate and fuel conflict.*

* This point was provided by a participant in writing after the meeting.

In the second part of the discussion, civil society participants were asked to describe the types of activities that their organisations were undertaking in order to counter disinformation.

They made the following points:

- Monitoring and researching the media as part of conflict response programmes (e.g. monitoring media consumption and trust in the media).
- Undertaking research on the impact of trust in governments during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Monitoring the impact of social media during peace processes in order to identify key threats (e.g. harassment; disinformation aimed at undermining peace talks; the weaponisation of information; and the use of fake accounts to discredit talks and delegitimise peace processes).
- Based on evidence indicating that reactive approaches (e.g. using anti-disinformation or counter-hate speech) are often ineffective due to the immediate erosion of public trust that follows the emergence of disinformation, taking an upstream and preventive approach by:
 - advocating for policy changes with social media companies (e.g. Twitter and Facebook) to encourage them to put in place similar policies for peace processes as they do for elections;
 - engaging with conflict parties directly in order to discuss their harmful behaviour before disinformation is spread;
 - integrating social media clauses in existing peace agreements.
- Developing programmes to support local media and journalists through training in fact-checking, dissemination and broadcasting of information on COVID-19.
- Supporting stakeholders in electoral processes (e.g. observation groups and political parties) by raising awareness and training them in media monitoring and debunking false information.
- Continuing to support offline initiatives such as community dialogue (e.g. supporting the reintegration of members of armed groups into their communities through the facilitation of in-person discussions rather than exclusively through social media messaging even though the latter is an important source of disinformation).
- Undertaking research on the weaponisation of social media, including studying the disinformation architecture, underlying conflict drivers and elements of resilience.
- Implementing a programme on conflict-sensitive journalism in which journalists are trained in the production of more accountable and less sensationalised content.
- (Upcoming) Publishing the results of research on handling harmful online content.
- (Upcoming) Undertaking research on the impact of disinformation on women in elections.
- Reinforcing the capacities of independent journalism to address disinformation (e.g. developing safety mechanisms, working with the judiciary to fight impunity, training aimed at increasing journalists' skills, and establishing co-operation with fact-checkers).*

- Advocating for increased transparency of social media content governance in order to enable the development of evidence-based and localised policies with the objective of curbing online harmful content.*
- Promoting media and information literacy within formal and informal education in order to strengthen citizens' critical thinking towards disinformation and their capacities to respond to it.*

* These points were provided by participants in writing after the meeting.

Finally, participants were asked to identify key topics that should be addressed in future discussions on disinformation and possible EU support to strengthen states' and societies' resilience to it in conflict-affected countries/regions.

They proposed the following topics:

- **Research and learning** to better understand the problem rather than focusing purely on identifying solutions: There is a chronic lack of understanding on how disinformation affects conflict contexts. Research into it should uncover evidence on effective responses to disinformation.
 - Specific suggestion: A discussion on investing in more diverse and qualitative research (e.g. anthropology, psychology, media studies) to better understand patterns of online behaviour.
- Developing a **better understanding of the 'disinformation architecture'** and a common, consistent understanding of the roles and responsibilities of all actors in the online environment: This should also help to give clarity on the origins of disinformation. Given that disinformation often involves political actors, it requires a level of 'working politically' in ways that donors and civil society actors are not necessarily accustomed.
- **The role of civil society in monitoring and countering disinformation:** This should be aimed at improving the context sensitivity of actions, the involvement of larger numbers of volunteers as a means of overcoming capacity constraints, and giving greater agency to local communities.
- Navigating disinformation in **contexts with restrictions on civic space and political freedoms.**
- Considering approaches that are **native to the digital space** (e.g. partnering with influencers) as opposed to introducing solutions and instruments from the outside.
- Ways to engage in **coalition and community building** between researchers, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and media and technology companies to monitor the vectors of disinformation in fragile contexts and identify and respond to disinformation trends.
- **Mental health:** Disinformation has a significant impact on those working in conflict contexts. Particular attention should be paid to the online safety of women.
- Ways to improve **engagement with local media:** Local media are key actors for understanding the dynamics of disinformation.
- Ways to **strengthen stakeholders:** (e.g. capacity building, awareness raising and sensitisation).
- **Social media regulation:** (e.g. freedom of speech versus control of disinformation, deplatforming, political advertisements, algorithm transparency and codes of conduct).
- **EU funding** for support to civil society actions that are aimed at countering disinformation.

Participants added the following suggestions in writing after the meeting:

- **Disinformation among other forms of deniable conflict:** How can disinformation be meaningfully integrated into conflict analysis with other forms of deniable and opaque forms of warfare?
- **Resilience to disinformation:** How have states built resilience to disinformation, particularly through a whole-of-government approach to these issues?

- **State-sponsored disinformation:** How are disinformation activities outsourced to 'digital mercenaries'?
- Social media platforms' **transparency on content moderation.**
- Ensuring the right balance between **addressing disinformation versus protecting freedom of expression.**

List of publications shared by participants during the meeting

- [Media and disinformation in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and their role in conflict resolution and peacebuilding](#) (European Resources for Mediation Support (ERMES III))
- [Media and Transitional Justice: A Dream of Symbiosis in a Troubled Relationship](#) (International Center for Transitional Justice)
- [Transitional Justice and Prevention: Summary Findings from Five Country Case Studies](#) (International Center for Transitional Justice)
- [Social Media in Peace Mediation](#) (swisspeace & United Nations Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs)

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](#).