Civil Society Dialogue Network

The implementation of the EU-wide Strategic Framework to Support Security Sector Reform: Gathering Civil Society Perspectives

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Meeting Report

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Wednesday 14 June, Brussels, Belgium

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The overall objective of this meeting was to exchange and gather civil society insights and recommendations for strengthening EU support to SSR for improved human security. The meeting provided inputs into the internal overall review process of the EU Strategic Framework to support SSR (SF to SSR).

The SF to SSR puts human security at the centre of the EU approach, stating that 'a national security system must be to ensure the security of individuals, as perceived and experienced by them.' It also emphasises the participation and engagement with diverse civil society actors (e.g. in development and monitoring of security and justice policy and activities; improving accountability, sustainability and national ownership). After seven years of implementation of the SF to SSR, the EU as one of the major donors in support to the security sector of partner countries, remains committed to identifying lessons and to learning to improve its support. The EU works with a multitude of state and non-state actors.

Support to and engagement with civil society organisations (CSOs) in partner countries is fundamental for human security in the implementation of the SF on SSR. The meeting brought together 32 participants, including 14 civil society experts and 8 officials from the European External Action Service (EEAS) and the European Commission (EC). The discussions were held under the Chatham House Rule.

There was no attempt to reach a consensus during the meeting or through this report, which represents the key points and recommendations put forward by the civil society participants.

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.

The following key points and recommendations emerged from the discussions.

1.   State of Play: Key trends and challenges in the EU support to SSR

The EU, fully in line with the SF to SSR, is engaged in supporting security sector reform in a number of countries including the four case-study countries (Georgia, Iraq, Niger and Mali[1]), albeit the ways of working differ depending on the context. The EU SF to SSR aims to support security actors to be more effective and accountable in providing better services to the population.

Some of the key trends and challenges discussed in the meeting include:

•   The EU continues to work mainly with state actors on SSR, and the increased **geopolitical competition** has further strengthened the focus on state-centred approaches. In many partner countries **political and civic space is shrinking.**

•   There are **competing models of security support** and the populations in the partner countries are impacted by such competition. Many EU partner countries do not rely only on the EU for security sector support anymore, but are resorting to private military companies and other actors, which provide support to regimes rather than protect the rights of the people.

•   **Populations in some EU partner countries are often not well informed of the EU efforts** and there is a continued sense of insecurity in some of the contexts. Misinformation campaigns are common in such contexts, and the combination of factors can lead to an atmosphere of suspicion towards the EU and also other Western actors working with state security and defence forces.

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[1] Civil society experts from Mali only attended part of the meeting (online) due to delays in visa processing, therefore some sections in this report do not discuss Mali.

•   **More and more SSR interventions are conducted in conflict-settings.** Conflict settings are not conducive to reform, and working in conflict settings can lead to **short-term security interventions**, with less focus on government accountability and human rights.

•   **Often state security actors do not consider civil society actors as responsible for oversight and monitoring** of the conduct of security forces, and it can be risky for civil society actors to engage in such roles.

•   Government corruption and exclusive governance are key drivers of insecurity, and **governance should be at the forefront of the EU efforts in SSR.**

Georgia

•   It was noted that on a political level, **ownership is impossible if the EU support does not match the demand.** 'Reform' itself requires states to go through continuous change, and can prompt resistance: in Georgian context, supporting 'governance' might be a more suitable term. According to a participant, Georgia has achieved all key milestones in governance with all instruments in place in the country. The EU should be clear about the next steps.

•   It has gotten more difficult for civil society to reach and participate in decision-making in the country with some of the new generation of politicians and civil servants having never engaged with CSOs. The **polarisation of the political environment** makes engagement in dialogue harder.

•   **Civil society has an important role in monitoring the human rights situation in the country** and has brought cases to the European Court of Human Rights, for example.

Iraq

•   There is a lack of government monopoly over violence, with weapons often ending up in the hands of militias or armed groups controlled by political parties. In Kurdistan, the division of Peshmerga forces among political parties and the influence of weapons on strengthening specific parties instead of the unified army is a significant trend. The primary challenge in Iraq and Kurdistan is the **lack of unified military bodies and the presence of partisan relationships within the security sector.** The challenge of arming militias instead of strengthening government-controlled forces is also a significant issue. **Challenges related to governance, corruption, and limited resources are likely to impact SSR efforts** in these contexts.

•   While the normative framework for human rights is good, the implementation of the commitments is not a priority for the government.

Niger

•   The Nigerian **constitution** states that security is a matter for all citizens, which has given impetus to CSOs creating committees to work with citizens and local stakeholders on human security in all regions.

•   While the government receives funding through international partnerships, the **corruption** level is high. The security and defence sector forms a large part of the national budget, but it was noted that there is no proper budgetary control, and 'defence secrecy' has been abused as a way of avoiding to disclose information.

•   The police in Niger receive little training, and many of the officers are illiterate. Police do not have enough resources to conduct investigations, which means that cases are **not brought to justice** and there is no accountability to the population. On the contrary, police are perceived as unpredictable and there is little trust in them by the population.

• There is a barrier between the security forces and the communities; and in some regions non-state armed groups are better accepted than the state.

• The population does not know what the EU is doing in the country, and the **lack of communications has created mistrust and difficulties for the EU and Western countries cooperating with the Nigerian government and army.** Citizen have been mobilised via social media to campaign for closing of foreign military bases.

2. Lessons identified from EU support to SSR and roles of civil society actors as partners to the EU

Some of the key observations of the EU support to civil society actors within the implementation of the SF to SSR include:

• Engagement **of civil society** is a good requirement, but often falls short in reality and is perceived as a 'tick the box' exercise with **no real impact during the implementation.**

• SSR interventions should be based on populations' expressed needs and perceptions of security. Interventions should be **conflict and gender-sensitive** in order for them to contribute positively to social contract and conflict transformation.

• **Wide range of civil society should be engaged in EU conflict analysis**, however, many civil society actors report not having any knowledge of such analysis conducted in their contexts and thereby it remains **unclear, how and with whom the analyses are done**.

• The EU has limitations in its context-specific and tailor-made approaches, when there is a strong push back towards e.g. **women's** or Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and gender diverse, Intersex, Queer and questioning **(LGBTIQ+) rights.**

Georgia

• It was noted that the civilian EU Monitoring Mission (EUMM) is not able to access Abkhazia and South Ossetia/Tskhinvali Region nor help their populations due to Russia blocking access and thereby limiting the mandate of the mission.[2]

• One of the challenges in Georgia is the **development of evidence-based policies**. According to a research study on everyday peace indicators (conducted before the Russian war of aggression in Ukraine), human security is one of the most relevant topics for people living in protracted conflict. However, **local governance structures often fail to address this dimension i.e. everyday security of people.** The EU could support linking such evidence into security sector decision-making.

> ➤ Conflict-affected groups and Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) are the most vulnerable groups, and **conducting regular and comprehensive needs assessment** would support responding to their needs.
> ➤ A research project focusing on **human rights and conscription** was pointed out to have been useful in understanding the state of affairs of recruits, and has provided an entry point into awareness-raising on human rights from the government perspective.

• The EU could broaden its engagement with civil society through national networks and coalitions. Any CSO working on e.g. human rights issues and similar will have links to security actors in the country. CSOs would benefit the EU giving them **more worth and weight and support an inclusive national dialogue process in a polarised context, where engagement of civil society on a formal level has been diminishing.**

> ➤ **The EU should support setting up dialogue platforms** (as many as possible) to discuss people-centred approaches to security.

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[2] One participant noted that instead of the terms 'Administrative Boundary Lines' and 'breakaway territories', the more appropriate terms would be 'occupied territories' and 'occupation lines'.

- Local disputes (ethnic, religious, civic) are managed by security forces and the police, but a different approach to resolving them is needed e.g. mediation and facilitation closer to the case (community security).

Iraq

- EU Advisory Mission in Iraq (EUAM Iraq) has invited relevant civil society actors to participate in discussion sessions, indicating a willingness to involve CSOs in dialogue on security sector reform.

- Visual presence is important, and **the EU MS have shown political will to visit hard to access areas** (e.g. Sinjar) to show support to the communities. Entering such communities in armoured vehicles and with armed security staff sends the wrong signal, however.

- It was noted that there is a need for the EU to demand the unification of military bodies in Iraq and Kurdistan and the cutting of partisan relationships within the security sector.

- **Iraq as a whole is a post-conflict country**, but the EU support has been focused on areas liberated from ISIS. **Former fighters suffering from post-war trauma** have returned to their homes all over Iraq without **proper reintegration** into communities.

  - ➤ Deeply-rooted problems in the communities will unlikely be removed with a narrow approach, and the EU **calls for proposals should have a systemic approach.**

- Good examples of improving security include **peace education** for civil servants, and academic studies on peace and development; creating **partnerships with local security governance structures** on issues such as climate crisis and gender-based violence (GBV), and the creation of a Code of Conduct for the Ministry of Interior on tackling GBV. CSOs with international funding have created **safe spaces and channels** to strengthen local capacities in security issues.

- **Proactive engagement with communities to tackle their security issues** requires long-term engagement, but once successful, it will be a cost-effective and sustainable way of preventing conflict.

For example, trained community police have had the possibility to de-escalate conflict without resorting to the use of force. This in turn impacts trust-building and can create an environment of collaborative models. The EU could better enhance the roles of CSOs in security sector by:

- ➢ Providing increased support and resources to build the capacity of CSOs, by fostering an enabling environment that ensures the **safety and protection of Iraqi CSOs**, and allowing them to operate freely and without fear of reprisals.
- ➢ **Enhancing coordination and cooperation mechanisms between the EU, CSOs, and other stakeholders involved in SSR, to facilitate meaningful partnerships and collaboration;**
- ➢ **Confidence-building** is needed to enable people to bring forward their needs to security actors.

• Albeit the good normative framework, human rights defenders (HRD) face legal bullying and threats, and the government is planning to suspend non-governmental organisations (NGOs) for having LGBTIQ+ programmes).

- ➢ HRDs need **protection** (e.g. shelters) and the EU should support following up on the recommendations of human rights reports (shadow reports) that they have prepared. Local ownership brings organic responses to human rights abuses and **social media campaigns** have been successful in getting illegally arrested HRDs released.
- ➢ The EU cooperation with security forces should focus on providing **trainings on human rights** and other relevant areas.

• **Engaging with non-state security and justice providers in Iraq requires a careful assessment of opportunities and risks.** This may involve exploring avenues for dialogue, encouraging compliance with human rights standards, and ensuring accountability and transparency in their operations.

Mali

•   On 18 June, a draft constitution for Mali was approved, and for the first time, **civil society is recognised for its role in participatory democracy.** The constitution has a section dedicated exclusively to traditional and local communities, and their roles with dimensions of conflict prevention and crisis management. Malian legislation is advanced (e.g. the inclusion of young people, women and the people with disabilities), but there are problems linked to implementation of the normative framework.

•   On a political level, decentralisation allows for better responses to local realities. Working with local authorities and **training them on understanding security as a response to people's needs requires support from technical and financial partners.**

•   The institutions responsible for the management, control and supervision of activities in the security sector are in place, but have a limited role, including the National Assembly and CSOs, which very often **lack the capacity and resources** in this area. **These institutions and actors must be strengthened in terms of capacity**, to guarantee their effectiveness and responsiveness on the ground, particularly through permanent monitoring and inspection missions. **Accountability must be ensured in terms of effective and efficient management of investments and materials, with a focus on the fight against corruption.**

•   After the 2012 crisis in Mali, there was an initiative on the national strategy for reforming the security sector and **security advisory committees** were set up. The committees bring security forces and communities together to discuss challenges and to identify solutions and suggest **social cohesion initiatives**. Unfortunately very few regions and municipalities have set up these committees, or they are not functional.

•   In a successful regional case, **community dialogues** were set up to discuss and understand what role communities can play in resolving security issues. Young people, women and the security forces participated in the dialogues. As a result of the dialogue, **concrete suggestions to improve the security priorities of communities were presented to the Ministry of Security and the Defence**

Commission of the transition government. It is important to train people in security issues, so that they know what mechanisms and laws exist to address their needs.

• **Linking traditional and formal justice systems (hybrid systems):** In Gao, the traditional leaders have set up 'colleges' where they assess cases between the police and citizens. Such mechanisms require logistical support and funding in order to be efficient.

Niger

• EUCAP Sahel Niger is building a bridge between the military and civilian population and such work is welcome and should be strengthened. **It is important for foreign and national security forces to be closer to populations and better understand them**; this will also be helpful in making the EU offer more attractive.

• It was noted that supporting mobile police forces could be an answer to managing some of the insecurity in the Sahel cross-border regions.

• There is **no formal framework of dialogue between the state and civil society**, and sometimes international requests to the government to engage civil society have been blocked by the government.

• Corruption in the security and defence system has disastrous consequences: investments into a corrupt security system will not yield good results.

> ➢ **Civil society actors can play a role in promoting transparency and accountability and are able, through advocacy, to push the government to take the needed steps to tackle corruption.** CSOs also have an important role in forming recommendations to tackle corruption and to follow up on their implementation. CSOs with expertise on corruption have also put forward a law to fight corruption and improve access to information.

• **CSOs are primarily focused on development and livelihood issues, with few dealing with political topics such as security.** The lack of stakeholders needs to be taken into account in relation to SSR and efforts should be given on strengthening the actors that do exist.

> ➢ **Collaboration with the EU (and other international partners) is quite limited for local CSOs** that do not have the capacity or resources to access funding opportunities, while they have the potential to make a change in their communities.
> ➢ **Dialogue between security forces and CSOs** have resulted in increased information exchange and confidence building. However, there are **limitations to the sustainability of dialogues**: when a commander changes, a lot of the work has to be re-initiated. There is a lack of communications among security forces, and their responses are not coordinated.

● **Traditional leaders and community elders should be involved in decision-making related to SSR**; they have a lot of influence and knowledge and can propose practical solutions to security challenges.

> ➢ In some of the vast regions there are not enough security forces to cover the terrain: **cooperation between security forces and traditional leaders would be important to address some of the gaps.** Due to lack of trust, however, this is not done at a larger scale and such territories are left at the mercy of violent non-state actors. Such cooperation can start with **small local initiatives that can be scaled up through knowledge sharing; they work better than military force.**

● In a local setting, people resort to traditional leaders as a first source of justice. However, traditional leaders have no legal standing in a court of law and if the parties are not satisfied with their decision, they can resort to normative sources of justice. However, traditional mechanisms do not provide proof or documentation. It would be important to **understand how to support hybrid models of justice.**

● Women have many roles: they are not just victims of conflict, but sources of information on e.g. prostitution and drug trafficking. They also have a role in education, and are often the ones encouraging men to fight.

3. Way forward for the EU

Key practical ways of improving human security and civil society roles as partners to the EU in SSR are presented below.

• EU partner governments should adopt laws and regulations guaranteeing **transparency and accountability in the security sector.**

• A mind-set change is needed to achieve people-centred approaches and gender-responsiveness in SSR support.

> ➢ Security sector is not inclusive and **the requirement to be more inclusive should be part of the conditionality for the EU support in partner countries.**
> ➢ The EU should **avoid top-down engagement with security institutions** only: laws in themselves do not change anything and engagement with formal institutions only creates exclusion.
> ➢ The definition of security in EU action should correspond to the **perceptions of communities** in areas such as education, health, food security, or inter-community conflicts. **Perception surveys are very useful to make security sector support more people-centred**: perception surveys will provide more granular information and can be used for context-specific responses. Such change in approach also includes broadening the understanding of who is a security actor/provider. The EU could utilise the existing networks of actors who already conduct such surveys.

• To tackle misinformation campaigns and to improve relations towards the populations, **the EU should consider how to improve its communications and visibility** in partner countries. The EU

should establish effective **mechanisms for dialogue between the EU and CSOs**, fostering open and transparent communication channels.

•   In partner countries, **the EU should leverage on existing activities, networks and research** for better outreach and for development of tailored approaches that can be scaled up. For example, the EU could extend its **outreach to communities** through activities funded by some of the EU Member States.

•   The EU needs to ensure that CSOs have a seat at the table during **decision-making** processes, allowing their perspectives to **influence policy and practice in SSR initiatives.** It was noted that participation of civil society actors is often limited to consultations at the beginning and the ending of the implementation of EU activities.

> ➢ **The EU should allocate resources to support the capacity-building efforts of civil society actors involved in security sector reform**; and recognize and acknowledge the valuable expertise and local knowledge that CSOs can bring, actively seeking their input in decision-making processes.
> ➢ **Best practices for improving community security include empowering individuals and civil society organisations to advocate for their own security needs and provide their own security solutions.** The focus should be on identifying concrete actions and strategies that can be implemented to address the challenges and maximise the impact of EU engagement with civil society in the context of security sector reform.
> ➢ **The EU should support the provision of safe spaces** for civil society actors to actively participate in discussions on security sector reform, ensuring their perspectives are heard and valued at all phases.
> ➢ It would be important to improve access to **funding opportunities** for CSOs, and streamline application processes for funding.

•   Using **bottom-up approaches could improve ownership and allow civil society to exercise its oversight role in the security sector**, and they should be engaged from the beginning until the end.

Such an incremental, bottom-up approach would be sustainable and independent of the EU support in the long-term.

• Some of the insecurities stem from large youth populations, many of which are unemployed, and their tense relations with security services. **Dialogues focusing on community security and other themes between local authorities, security services and youth** (including women) can be helpful in alleviating tensions and building trust.

• Women need to be included in structures, where they are traditionally being excluded. The empowerment of women should be based on the understanding of their local context without which an intervention cannot be successful. **Women's needs and community needs are interrelated**, and should not be addressed in silos.

• Security interventions should be assessed, among other dimensions, based on their **impact on gender issues.** Practical solutions for improving **gender-responsiveness and inclusivity in EU support to SSR** include: Developing gender-sensitive policies and guidelines, providing capacity-building support for security sector actors on gender-related issues, and engaging diverse actors, including women's organisations and marginalised groups, in SSR processes.

• **Any security-related trainings must be context-dependent and adapted based on needs and demand.** It should be noted that using quantitative indicators such as the number of people trained is not an adequate way of measuring change.

• The EU should better understand and find ways of supporting **hybrid models of justice provision.**

• Countries in conflict and post-conflict phases are violent with security actors that tend to be very violent, too. Engagement with the EU should provide **nonviolent alternatives** to this. Policies could include terms such as 'nonviolence' and to be humanised.