Civil Society Dialogue Network Policy Meeting

Conflict Dynamics and Drivers of Peace in the Sahel Region: Gathering Civil Society Perspectives

Friday 6 March 2020
Brussels, Belgium

MEETING REPORT

The overall objective of the meeting was to gather civil society input on conflict dynamics and drivers of peace in the Sahel region, and to allow participants to exchange with and provide recommendations to the European Union (EU) in relation to its engagement in the region.

The meeting brought together 35 participants, including 21 civil society experts from the Sahel region (Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger) and officials from the European External Action Service (EEAS), the European Commission (EC) and the office of the EU Special Representative for the Sahel.

Discussions were held under the Chatham House Rule. There was no attempt to reach a consensus during the meeting or through this report, and this document presents the key points and recommendations which were made by the civil society participants.

Overview of the key points and recommendations

1. The EU must base its engagements in the Sahel on the needs and the human security of the populations living in the region. It must ensure that its engagements do no harm and are conflict-sensitive. In order to do so, it must consult diverse local and national civil society for the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of its actions.

   - In order to be conflict-sensitive, the EU should conduct robust conflict analysis (which integrates gender analysis) with input from civil society where it is looking to engage.
   - The EU should analyse further the different ways its actions in the Sahel are perceived by populations. Participants highlighted that some people consider that the EU is pursuing its own interests in the region, and that these interests do not necessarily align with those of the region's inhabitants.
   - The EU should fundamentally review the structure of its model for financing peacebuilding and development actions, and ensure that decisions and implementation are driven by local and national civil society input and initiatives, in order to maximise the effectiveness and sustainability of aid. It should particularly invest further into local / national civil society peacebuilding initiatives. It is too often the case that aid funding goes through different actors through a top-down, pyramidal approach, and that it has a reduced impact as a result.

2. The EU, other international actors and national governments of the region put too much emphasis on security-related actions (particularly military actions) to address conflict issues in the Sahel region (including through the G5 Sahel). Security-related actions may sometimes be needed, but they can also be counter-productive and they do not address the root causes of conflicts. The EU should focus on, and invest much more in, peacebuilding, development and humanitarian actions instead.

   - Security-related actions may be counter-productive in different ways: they may (1) strengthen national armed forces that commit abuses against populations and, as a result, (2) contribute to recruitment by armed groups by fuelling grievances, (3) interrupt dialogue and demobilisation processes, (4) displace armed groups (and, as a result, contribute to spreading violence), , etc. In addition, the multiplicity of international actors engaged in security-related actions makes it difficult for populations to understand who is responsible for what, and what the purpose of actions is.
   - Security-related measures such as stricter border management controls and curfews may also negatively impact the livelihood of communities.
   - Security-related actions may sometimes be needed to help and protect populations and to establish a state presence allowing for the provision of public services. However, they should be conflict-sensitive, they should fully integrate civilian protection and respect for human rights, they should be based on the needs of populations and they should be part of broader political efforts involving governance reforms and dialogue.
   - Some participants expressed that the G5 Sahel should significantly increase the involvement of civil society in decision-making, while others stated that the G5 Sahel and its Joint Force were seen by many in the Sahel populations as unhelpful, and even as problematic.

3. The EU should ensure that it analyses and understands the diverse nature of armed groups and how they are perceived locally. There is a wide variety of armed groups across the region, and their degree of legitimacy among communities varies. Armed groups (and national armed forces) are also not necessarily homogeneous.

- Armed groups emanating from communities may have local legitimacy (especially self-defence groups, which may collaborate with village development committees), but this is not always the case. There are also examples of governments allying with certain armed groups (e.g. militias) to fight other armed groups, but allying with the government is not a guarantee of local legitimacy and this can exacerbate tensions between communities. It is only by gathering input from local civil society that the EU may understand local perceptions and the dynamics of armed groups.
- Recruitment factors are overwhelmingly non-ideological, including for groups labelled as 'violent extremist groups'. Recruitment is usually driven by grievances against authorities, a sense of social, economic and political injustice, a lack of access to decent livelihoods and to public services, etc. The EU should focus its efforts on addressing these issues in order to help prevent conflict and build peace in the region.

4. The EU should use its political dialogue with its partner governments from the region to insist that they implement fundamental governance reforms. The EU should also be vocal publicly about abuses and problematic actions carried out by its partner governments and their armed forces.

- The EU should strongly insist on significant improvements in the accountability and functioning of government actors, in particular national armed forces. Abuses and killings committed by national armed forces against populations are a major driver of recruitment by armed groups, as the military largely acts with impunity (in addition, in some cases, certain units within the armed forces may commit abuses and carry out violent acts against communities without the direct knowledge of their hierarchy). This is also true of abuses of power and predatory practices that civilian government actors engage in.
- There are barriers to participation in public affairs for many population groups, particularly for diverse women, girls and boys, and specific communities are also sometimes disenfranchised (e.g. recruitment processes for government civil servants often lack transparency). There is a need to revise the social contract between populations and authorities, and to put an end to discriminatory policies and practices at the local, national and regional levels (for the latter, it was suggested that the EU encourage the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) to deepen its engagement with civil society). National armed forces often also fail to include officers and/or soldiers from all communities, which makes it harder to build trust (some participants expressed that this was less of an issue in Mauritania and Niger).
- The EU should condition the provision of financial and material support to partner governments on the implementation of governance reforms. Corruption at all levels of government is a major issue throughout the region. It undermines trust in public institutions and prevents international and public funds from reaching their intended beneficiaries.
- The EU should support comprehensive security sector reform (SSR), with the help of civil society, to ensure that the protection of civilians and respect for human rights are at the core of the mandate and functioning of security forces.
- There is a lack of citizen oversight of public actions (see also point 7 below), and parliaments often only echo what the government is saying rather than give a voice to populations.

5. The EU should promote judicial reforms and positive transitional justice initiatives in its political dialogue with its partner governments, so as to allow populations (including victims) to have a fair and effective access to justice, and to ensure that authorities are held accountable.

- The formal justice system is often plagued by issues, including corruption, politicisation, a lack of enforcement of decisions, discrimination, slow processes, high costs, a lack of physical presence in certain areas, legal texts (e.g. national laws and international agreements) not being applied and/or adapted to local realities, a lack of protection for women, girls and boys, etc. Populations are also often insufficiently aware of their rights.

- The widespread corruption and politicisation of the judiciary in certain areas means that it is not seen as credible by populations. This can help armed groups gain support, as they may be more effective in delivering a form of justice – even though it is often detrimental to women, whose rights are usually ignored by armed groups (including certain groups promoting / imposing sharia law). Populations would rather see the state and traditional actors be more effective in delivering justice.

- The EU should build on complementarities between the formal and informal justice systems. It can be helpful to support traditional / informal justice mechanisms where they have local legitimacy, are more effective than formal mechanisms and do not discriminate against certain groups. The EU should both promote reforms in the formal justice system (one participant raised the example of ensuring that police officers in charge of gathering evidence for cases are independent from the military and political authorities), and strengthen or regulate positive aspects of the informal justice system (while paying attention to sensitive issues, such as the role of religious law in certain areas).

6. The EU should help national and local authorities in the region improve their provision of public services, including in areas such as administration, education, health, justice, etc., in particular in remote areas. However, this has to be accompanied by positive governance reforms in order for diverse populations to benefit from a fair and effective access to public services.

- Armed groups fill the void left by the absence or the corruption of the state; they seek to obtain legitimacy locally by providing services that the population needs and by denouncing the failings of the state.

- The EU should engage with its partners to ensure that the provision of public services is inclusive. For example, in areas where internally displaced persons (IDPs) / refugees are living and being helped, access to health services and different types of support should also be provided to local communities in order to avoid a rise in tensions between groups. Some participants argued that positive discrimination may be helpful in certain cases to provide support to specific groups (e.g. to Fulani communities), but others pointed out that it is important to be sensitive to how this may contribute to fuelling tensions with other groups.

- It is essential to ensure that populations have access to education, from school at an early age to vocational training. The EU should promote education curricula which underline the importance of diversity and inclusivity, highlight the historical contributions of diverse communities, push back against sectarian discourses, and integrate peace education.

7. The EU should support local and national civil society, including through capacity building programmes and long-term funding adapted to their needs and initiatives, and by promoting an open civic space in its political dialogue with its partner governments. As funds are still often diverted by state actors, the EU should seek to fund civil society organisations (CSOs) as directly as possible (in particular local CSOs based in remote areas) and make it easier for them to access funds, including for cross-border initiatives.

- The EU should engage further with civil society at all levels, including through its delegations (EUDs). It should also communicate better about its engagements, about opportunities for partnerships with CSOs, and about the positive roles of civil society to prevent conflict and build peace.

- The EU should promote and support civil society's key role in helping build trust between authorities (particularly national security forces) and populations. Civil society can help government institutions be more inclusive, respectful of human rights, transparent and accountable, and improve how they communicate and exchange with local populations.

- The EU should defend and help build CSOs' oversight and monitoring role.

- The EU should help local community leaders (including village leaders, religious leaders, etc.) and traditional / customary structures to prevent conflict, including by training leaders and influencers in non-violent conflict resolution and mediation, and by supporting local conflict analysis, early warning and early action mechanisms. It should particularly promote and support the key roles that diverse women, girls and boys can play in these structures. It should also support the development of local and national expertise on peace and conflict.

- The EU should support national and local media's ability to push back against the spread of hate speech and fake news (one participant highlighted the need to push back against increasing levels of intolerance and stigmatisation in Mauritania, which has so far largely avoided the violence affecting much of the rest of the region).

- The EU should strengthen inclusive local community structures, and work to ensure that local and national civil society actors are able to carry out peacebuilding and development actions, so that efforts are sustainable and continue after support from international donors has ended. As traditional structures have been weakened / facing corruption issues in some contexts, the EU should also promote good governance among traditional actors and CSOs whilst recognising that civil society is not homogeneous (e.g. certain CSOs are largely piloted by government actors, and in some cases it may be helpful for national authorities to push back against religious leaders that promote radical teachings – one participant mentioned that this was particularly needed in Burkina Faso).

- The EU should particularly support CSOs emanating from – and working to help – vulnerable groups, including women, girls and boys, victims of conflict, IDPs, targeted communities, etc., in particular human rights defenders (HRDs) and providers of psychosocial support.

- The EU should help civil society coordinate and develop synergies, including across borders.

8. The EU should support dialogue initiatives at all levels, in particular (1) between communities, (2) between national security forces and populations, and (3) between armed groups, communities and authorities.

- Civil society actors have a key role to play in fostering dialogue across parties. In particular, the EU should put pressure on its partner governments to allow CSOs to engage in dialogue with armed groups without repercussions from authorities. There can usually be no sustainable solution to conflict without engaging in dialogue with armed groups and their members. Some participants argued that using terms such as 'terrorists', 'jihadists' and 'violent extremists' to label armed groups is unhelpful in that regard (in addition to inadequate to describe them).

- The EU should strongly support and invest in social cohesion initiatives, including those involving joint cultural, educative and economic activities, thematic and targeted discussion fora (at all levels) involving diverse women, men, girls and boys, as well as policies and discourses to push back against stigmatisation and discrimination towards certain communities. It should promote building safe spaces for dialogue, in particular for women.

- The EU should promote an understanding of responsibility that limits responsibility for violence to the individuals committing the violent acts, without extending it to their families and communities – while being sensitive to local cultural understandings of responsibility.

- Combatants who seek to leave armed groups should be accompanied in their reintegration (socially and legally), including by having access to trainings and socio-economic opportunities. However, these opportunities should also be provided to people who did not join armed groups and to victims, so as not to create incentives to join the groups or to cause resentment.

9. The EU should support (national and local, formal and informal) governance initiatives aimed at addressing inequalities and ensuring that populations have fair and equitable access to natural resources, land and decent livelihoods. It should support inclusive efforts to provide people with professional training and economic opportunities, particularly young women and young men. The EU should also work to reduce climate change and to mitigate its effects.

- Poverty and a lack of access to means of survival can drive people to join armed groups in order to be able to support their families, but socio-economic inequalities and an accompanying sense of injustice can play a deeper role in fuelling conflict within and between communities, as well as between populations and authorities.

- In many areas affected by conflict, populations were facing difficulties in accessing natural resources before the violence broke out, and this can be compounded by the effects of climate change. In order for transitions out of conflict to be sustainable, the EU should adopt a transformational approach to addressing the structural barriers and inequalities relating to populations' access to natural resources and decent livelihoods. It should also ensure that partnerships with the private sector do not have a negative impact on local communities (including with regard to the distribution of resources, the environmental impact of the activities, etc.).

- The EU should support more cross-border development and social cohesion initiatives, in particular in relation to access to land and natural resources.

10. Although many of the root causes of the conflicts in the Sahel originate in the region, external factors may also contribute to exacerbating tensions and violence, such as the situation in Libya and the insufficiently-monitored supply of weapons to Sahel governments by international actors.