



CSDN NGO-Roundtable Meeting in The Netherlands

Meeting Communication

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European Peacebuilding Liaison Office

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Civil Society Dialogue Network

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EPLO NGO-Roundtable Meeting in The Netherlands

Background

On 19 November 2024, EPLO organised a Civil Society Dialogue Network (CSDN) NGO-Roundtable meeting (RTM) in The Hague. The objective of the meeting was to enable representatives of Dutch-based peacebuilding NGOs to exchange together on two areas 1) the political context for peacebuilding with the current Dutch Government and 2) Dutch government engagement with the European Union (EU) on peace and fragility in external action. The exchanges aimed to enable participants to have a better collective understanding of the challenges and opportunities for increased advocacy on peacebuilding support towards the Dutch Government and European Union. Participants explored challenges, opportunities, and strategic responses to the changing landscape affecting conflict prevention and peacebuilding (CPPB).

The meeting brought together around 20 Dutch-based peacebuilding civil society organisations. 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 presents the key points and recommendations put forward by the civil society participants.

Key Discussion Points

A New Environment for Peacebuilding Civil Society

Participants highlighted their significant concerns about the Dutch government's proposed funding cuts for civil society and the broader trend of **shrinking civic space**, in particular for peacebuilding civil society organisations (CSOs). These changes reflect a broader global challenge for peacebuilding organisations. Attendees emphasised the need to craft **new narratives** to uphold peacebuilding's value in both the Dutch and European context, particularly in the face of rising far right and populist projects and investments in militarised solutions globally. There was a strong emphasis on the need to identify **alternative allies and sectors**, for example in academia, think tanks, the private sector or former military staff to strengthen support and reposition CPPB within political discourses. **Dealing with unpredictability** and uncertainty for funding and the overall environment for peacebuilding will be central moving forward.

Discussions also underscored the rise of **disinformation and divisive rhetoric**, which challenge efforts to foster social cohesion and cross-sectoral collaboration. The role of **media** in reshaping public narratives was deemed critical, alongside **engaging the general public**, in particular **youth**, to build solidarity and support for peacebuilding objectives. Conscious that anti-gender and anti-rights movements are increasingly well organised and funded, participants stressed the need to recognise the danger they pose and to organise jointly to counter these developments.

Strategies for Adaptation and Reorientation

Adapting language and framing was a recurring theme. Participants debated the **dilemma** whether peacebuilding objectives should be communicated in different ways to adapt to the language of migration, stabilisation and security; or whether communication should maintain a principled value-based approach. The **professionalisation of the sector** was identified as a double-edged sword, enabling credibility when engaging with authorities but creating a disconnect with grassroots movements and the general public. Discussants also mentioned the possibility to

adapt to **changing priorities on geographies** under the new Dutch and European leadership, and to orient policy staff towards dedicated regions and coordinate more strongly with partner networks, for example in the **Sahel and Great Lakes region**.

The Dutch government's focus on **localisation** was discussed as an entry point to leverage expertise from peace organisations, however, concerns about the genuineness of the implementation of the localisation agenda were raised as well. Participants stressed that the focus on localisation could also be an opportunity to rethink the role of international NGOs (INGOs) in the sector. The importance of driving **sustainable efforts of localisation** and **supporting local actors** was emphasised while addressing vulnerabilities that might arise for local actors from higher visibility due to reduced INGO presence in conflict-affected contexts. Existential questions of **INGOs' roles in this evolving environment** remain pressing, requiring introspection, a **decolonial approach** and adaptability.

Opportunities for Engagement

Despite challenges, participants identified opportunities to influence the new leadership, both at the Dutch and EU level, especially through **knowledge-sharing, peer learning** and **capacity-building** initiatives. Despite the divisions that run through Dutch civil society and politics, there is a long tradition of peacebuilding in the Netherlands to build on and leverage. **Strategic engagement with opposition parties and committed civil servants** was encouraged to maintain momentum. Participants identified the need for better analysis and mapping of actors to enable strategic engagement and framing of objectives to counter divisive rhetoric and **cross-societal divides while remaining principled**. The EU remains a vital platform for thematic priorities, such as countering anti-gender movements and advancing the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda, especially amidst a politically uncertain Dutch context.

Solidarity and Collaboration

Participants reiterated the importance of **unity and coordination** within the peacebuilding sector, recognising the dangers of fragmentation in this new hostile environment. **Sharing information, fostering mutual support**, and **leveraging the diverse strengths of each organisation** within the sector were emphasised as possible avenues for cooperation. The need to jointly resist policies designed to divide and undermine CSOs was a central focus of the conversations, requiring open and honest communication within the sector. Individual organisations also raised that there may be a need to reflect on possible transitions from purely programmatic approaches to more activist and visible stances.

While a new hostile environment for civil society and peacebuilding CSOs will have different consequences across the sector, the maintenance of certain red lines in principle remains essential. Mental health support for marginalised groups targeted by discriminatory agendas will continue to be important moving forward.

Conclusion

While the current context poses serious risks, it also offers opportunities for innovation, solidarity, and renewed engagement. Participants recognised the urgency of organising collectively, crafting stronger narratives, and standing resilient against challenges to the sector's mission and values. The meeting centrally raised the importance of innovative action from the peacebuilding sector against the current backlash and the need to reflect on ways of working in enhanced strategic and coordinated ways.