FINAL EVALUATION

Civil Society Dialogue Network (CSDN) Phase IV

European Peacebuilding Liaison Office

Final report: 09 June 2023

Debbie Ball

Contents

Acronyms

Acronym	Explanation
CP/PB	Conflict Prevention and Peacebuilding
CSDN	Civil Society Dialogue Network
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
CwA	Conference with Academics
EPLO	European Peacebuilding Liaison Office
EEAS	European External Action Service
EC	European Commission
EU	European Union
FIM	Funding Instruments Meeting
FPI	Service for Foreign Policy Instruments
GM	Geographic Meeting
HoA	Horn of Africa
IcSP	Instrument contributing to Stability & Peace
ISP	Integrated Approach for Security & Peace Directorate
KII	Key Informant Interviews
MO	Member Organisation
MS	Member State(s)
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NGO-RTM	Non-Governmental Organisation Round-Table Meetings
OECD/DAC	The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development's Development Assistance Committee
PM	Policy Meeting
PMT	Project Management Team
POG	Project Oversight Group
SoW	Scope of Work
ToR	Terms of Reference
TS	Training Seminar

I.   Executive Summary

The European Peacebuilding Liaison Office (EPLO) has been implementing a project since 2010 entitled "Support to the Civil Society Dialogue Network on conflict prevention and peacebuilding (CSDN IV)". The fourth and current phase of CSDN has been extended by 3-months until the end of June 2023. A further three-month extension request has been submitted to the EU, which would extend the project until September 2023. This 42-month project is funded by the European Union (EU) through the Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace (IcSP) for a total amount of EUR 2,630,952.38.

The agreed logical framework (logframe) for the project outlines the **overall objective** as: "to continue to contribute to the enhancement of EU and civil society capacities to anticipate, prevent and respond to violent conflict and crisis, and to support conflict-affected countries in building peace".

The **three specific objectives** are as follows:

- Outcome (Specific Objective) 1: To maintain and strengthen a robust EU-level dialogue mechanism between EU policymakers and civil society actors on issues relating to the EU's peacebuilding policies and practices.
- Outcome (Specific Objective) 2: To continue to build the capacities of civil society actors working on peacebuilding and conflict prevention to engage in dialogue with EU policymakers on issues relating to the EU's peacebuilding policies and practices.
- Outcome (Specific Objective) 3: To continue to strengthen EPLO's capacity to manage CSDN through its networking, coordination, and policy functions.

The **four outputs connected to these objectives** are as follows:

- Output 1: CSDN's role as a mechanism for enabling civil society actors to engage in dialogue with EU policy-makers on issues relating to the EU's peacebuilding policies and practices is strengthened.
- Output 2: The capacities of civil society actors involved in CSDN activities to contribute to the EU's peacebuilding policies and practices are increased.
- Output 3: EPLO's capacity to manage CSDN through its networking, coordination, and policy functions is strengthened.
- Output 4: EU policy-makers' and civil society actors' understanding of issues relating to peacebuilding and conflict prevention, and the EU's role in them is increased.

This final evaluation provides narrative qualitative findings related to each of the four outputs. As outlined in the Scope of Work (see Annex I), the overarching purpose of this final evaluation is to assess the project's success in achieving its specific objectives and outputs. It also examined:

- Lessons learnt from the project's success and challenges, including how successes were shared and challenges were overcome; and
- Recommendations for future programming based on learning from CSDN Phase IV.

The evaluation was conducted between 20 March and 26 May 2023 and consisted of a document review, as well as interviews and discussions with 23 people associated with the project.

This report includes a methodology section outlining any limitations to the study; the main findings, organised according to each of the four main outputs; and a cross-cutting section which looks at the overarching findings related to monitoring and evaluation, and project management. This is followed

by recommendations. The fifth and final section outlines the conclusions. The annexes include the original Scope of Work, list of evaluation participants, and the primary documents reviewed.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Overall findings in related to OECD/DAC criteria:

Relevance & Coherence	• The activities delivered aligned with the project proposal and addressed the need for a mechanism to connect the EU with civil society around conflict and peace. • It was noted that the knowledge within EPLO and the trust it has built with the EU provides EPLO and the CSDN mechanism with a unique ability to meet this need. • The activities delivered aligned with the needs of the EU related to specific policies, guidelines, or review meetings. However, more could be done to broaden the reach of this project in connection with additional EU institutions.
Effectiveness	• The activities delivered proved effective in delivering above target number of CSDN events (39 to date, compared to a September 2023 target of 46). Of note was the ability of the project to adapt rapidly to COVID-19-related complications. • Monitoring initiatives have supported documentation of these quantitative results, but there has been limited focus on tracking overall progress towards impact and change, which could have supported enhanced effectiveness.
Sustainability & Efficiency	• Engagement with CSDN has enabled many participants (from civil society and across the EU) to broaden their network and establish connections with others they would not otherwise have had the chance to meet. For some CSO experts and EU officials these relationships will continue beyond CSDN. • Engagement with CSDN events has deepened participants' knowledge and understanding of conflict and peace issues, particularly enhancing their ability to hear a range of perspectives around local contextual dynamics. • Participation in CSDN Training Seminars has deepened CSO experts' knowledge and understanding in EU institutions and how they function. • However, more could still be done to broaden CSDN's reach and influence amongst other EU institutions and amongst a wider range of conflict-based CSOs, and to improve inclusion/diversity, including for young people.
Impact	• Overall, inputs from CSDN events have been used to inform and influence EU policy and practice related to conflict prevention and peacebuilding. Several concrete examples are provided in this report. • Furthermore, the strengthened understanding and knowledge amongst CSOs around the EU resulted in several CSOs changing their own ways of engaging with the EU, and there are even some examples of CSOs changing their own approaches to CP/PB.

Table 1: Overall findings in relation to OECD/DAC criteria

Output 1: CSDN's role as a mechanism for enabling civil society actors to engage in dialogue with EU policy-makers on issues relating to the EU's peacebuilding policies and practices is strengthened.

Overall, the evaluation has found that work undertaken during Phase IV of CSDN has supported the achievement of this output. CSDN events were seen to be relevant to current and emerging topics within conflict prevention and peacebuilding. The events were organised and facilitated in a highly-effective manner, and were particularly adept at adapting to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Greater clarity around the purpose of each meeting and how they connect to EU processes could help these meetings to have greater impact in future. Likewise, finding new ways to support safe spaces for divergent opinions to be shared on sensitive topics – even amongst a greater diversity of participants – could further deepen CSDN's impact. Knowledge and awareness was increased for participants through participation in CSDN, but some consideration of how to integrate overarching dialogue themes and/or holding a series of dialogue events could further help the sustainability and impact of CSDN.

Output 2: The capacities of civil society actors involved in CSDN activities to contribute to the EU's peacebuilding policies and practices are increased.

Overall, the evaluation has found that work undertaken during Phase IV of CSDN has supported the achievement of this output. CSDN events were seen to be relevant to civil society actors looking to increase their knowledge and understanding of the EU and to connect with EU officials directly. The training in particular has proven to be highly effective in enhancing CSO capacity. Some CSOs have adapted the way they engage with the EU as a result of CSDN (both through specific connections made, and through the increased knowledge of what is most effective). Further, some CSOs noted an impact from CSDN on their overall approach to and understanding of conflict prevention and peacebuilding. However, consideration could be given to achieving greater sustainabilty through a more effective social media and public outreach strategy, as the current use of videos (whilst high-quality in themselves) is a little ad-hoc.

Output 3: EPLO's capacity to manage CSDN through its networking, coordination, and policy functions is strengthened.

Overall, the evaluation has found that work undertaken during Phase IV of CSDN has supported the achievement of this output. EPLO has proven itself to be an effective and efficient lead for CSDN, and this evaluation establishes that there is a significant level of trust between the EU and EPLO, and between CSOs and EPLO, which allows this project to function successfully. The team's rapid and thoughtful adaptation to the circumstances of Covid has been highly commended. To some extent the switch to online meetings has reduced the lead-in time for CSDN events, and this has sometimes impacted the quality of research and preparation, including the time needed to identify expert participants.

Output 4: EU policy-makers' and civil society actors' understanding of issues relating to peacebuilding and conflict prevention, and the EU's role in them is increased.

Overall, the evaluation has found that work undertaken during Phase IV of CSDN has supported the achievement of this output. CSDN events had a practical and direct influence on specific EU policies, guidelines, and information notes related to policies and practice on conflict prevention and peacebuilding issues. However, more could be done to track such changes to support overall programme effectiveness, and further consideration could be given to reaching additional EU officials and institutions who do not directly work on conflict and peacebuilding issues.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations related to the strategic approach and positioning within the EU:

- For CSDN to work with EU interlocuters (through POG, and with wider EU consultation) to consider ways to **influence a broader diversity of EU institutions and officials** in order to promote improved conflict prevention and peacebuilding interventions across EU budgets, decisions, policies and practices.
- For the CSDN team and POG to consider ways to **curate and facilitate an overarching dialogue process,** which goes beyond single meetings to **inform and influence broader strategic aims** relevant to the peace and conflict community.
- **For the POG to ensure there is sufficient time and preparation included** to enable more EU officials to engage meaningfully in CSDN events, including officials from any additional institutions identified through the influencing strategy outlined above.

Recommendations related to the format and content of CSDN events:

- To consider **different categories and formats for CSDN events** to enable a greater degree of flexibility in order to suit different topics, logistical needs, and types of processes.
- If hybrid meetings are to be used, it is critical to develop an improved delivery approach. As a minimum, this should include an **investment in new audio/visual technology** (see this article for examples: https://hbr.org/2021/06/what-it-takes-to-run-a-great-hybrid-meeting).
- For CSDN and POG to consider ways to **support a greater level of follow-up, to ensure participants have access to improved information on how materials and inputs from CSDN has been used by the EU** to inform any Concept or other policy document.

Recommendations related to diversity and inclusion of participants:

- **To continue to make improvements around Diversity, Equality and Inclusion** to support a broader range of people to fully participate. *Includes consideration of participation fees, meeting accessibility/etc.*
- For POG to consider **allowing more time and resources to identify relevant, context-focused civil society organisations, and to more fully consider how to overcome any barriers to meaningful participation they may face.** *Includes consideration of power balances where local CSOs are funded by INGOs, or restrictions on speaking freely in front of those they do not know.*

Recommendations related to new ideas for CSDN Phase V:

- To consider **new outreach and engagement methods to connect with a broader range of audiences** with relevant messages, noting that any ideas adopted will need to fit with the broader strategy and available budget. *Suggested that the new phase could include use of digital and social media tools, transformation of the EPLO website, publication of discussion papers, and the potential partnership with media actors.*

Recommendations related to Management and Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning:

- To **improve monitoring and record incremental change.** Includes monitoring systems & tools to track deliverables, demonstrate incremental changes, and provide evidence of progress in the longer term. Use of such tools could enable CSDN to have a more nuanced understanding of how the network contributes to change, understand more clearly whose voice is being heard, and understand any incremental steps being taken towards policy and practice shift within the EU.
- To use **Management Responses** to document reflections and progress related to evaluation feedback.
- To consider **mechanisms to further outsource administration and logistical support required for CSDN events.**
- For the **POG to consider additional time and preparation, to support a comprehensive approach to engaging EU officials in relevant CSDN events.** And to consider ways of using

internal EU knowledge management systems and mechanisms (online or brownbag lunches, etc) as a way of **reinforcing the value of CSO consultation in relation to policy and practice development.**

- For **CSDN to consider increasing staff capacity and resources in light of the recommendations made in this evaluation** related to the importance of preparation, research, website/database improvements, and to support new ideas related to new ways of working, outreach methods, and advocacy/audience strategy development.

II.   Methodology

The overall design of this study used the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)/Development Assistance Committee (DAC) revised criteria for evaluations from 2019[1], and used the logframe to develop the tools for data collection.

Tables 2 and 3 present the overarching lines of inquiry used for this evaluation. These helped to inform and structure findings and recommendations.

Lines of inquiry, adapted from OECD/DAC criteria	
Relevance	Did the activities align with the expectations and needs of the key target groups? Why / Why not? How suitable were any project adaptations in continuing to meet project needs? What were they? How well did they work?
Effectiveness	To what extent did the process for designing events vary? And to what extent did this variation influence any results? How? Why / Why not? To what extent did the project bring about any unintended results? What were they?
Impact	Beyond the immediate results, has there been (or is there anticipated) any EU practice or policy change that can be partially or fully attributed to the project? How? Why / Why not? Beyond the immediate results, has there been (or is there anticipated) any change in civil society practice or policy that can be partially or fully attributed to the project? How? Why / Why not?

Table 2: Lines of inquiry

Objectives, outputs and indicators interrogated
Objective 1: To maintain and strengthen a robust EU-level dialogue mechanism between EU policymakers and civil society actors on issues relating to the EU's peacebuilding policies and practices.   **Output 1:** CSDN's role as a mechanism for enabling civil society actors to engage in dialogue with EU policy-makers on issues relating to the EU's peacebuilding policies and practices is strengthened.
Objective 2: To continue to build the capacities of civil society actors working on peacebuilding and conflict prevention to engage in dialogue with EU policymakers on issues relating to the EU's peacebuilding policies and practices.   **Output 2:** The capacities of civil society actors involved in CSDN activities to contribute to the EU's peacebuilding policies and practices are increased.
Objective 3: To continue to strengthen EPLO's capacity to manage CSDN through its networking, coordination, and policy functions.   **Output 3:** EPLO's capacity to manage CSDN through its networking, coordination, and policy functions is strengthened.

---

[1] The full list of criteria and explanations can be found here: https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/543e84ed-en/1/3/4/index.html?itemId=/content/publication/543e84ed-en&_csp_=535d2f2a848b7727d35502d7f36e4885&itemIGO=oecd&itemContentType=book#section-d1e3395

> *Cross-cutting*
>
> **Output 4 (Linked to Objectives 1, 2 and 3):** EU policymakers' and civil society actors' understanding of issues relating to peacebuilding and conflict prevention, and the EU's role in them, is increased.

Table 3: Logframe objectives and outputs

The evaluation consisted of three primary components. These were data collection, data analysis and report writing. These are summarised below.

Data collection

The data collection involved three specific processes which included the document review, semi-structured key informant interviews (KIIs) and 1 workshop with EPLO staff.

Document review
The document review covered the project proposal documents for CSDN Phase IV, interim narrative reports, outcome monitoring reports, POG minutes, evaluations of earlier CSDN phases, and materials (participant lists, notes, reports, participant feedback) related to selected CSDN events. Documents were initially prioritised within EPLO at the beginning of the assignment. There were two phases to the document review. The initial document review informed the development of the interview and discussion questions. The subsequent review was done to align documents received to interviews and the workshop in order to triangulate findings and influence additional interviews to further validate or substantiate findings.

Staff workshop
The consultant organised one workshop to bring together all EPLO staff engaged in the CSDN project in order to gather their input and feedback. The questions for the workshop were designed to capture key trends and lessons learned about what works, and to identify possible new ways of working for a future phase. The workshop lasted four hours, and was conducted with seven people in person plus one person attending online. In addition, three workshop participants were interviewed on a one-to-one basis to solicit additional feedback.

Key informant interviews
KIIs were conducted with a total of 18 people. These included stakeholders from a range of organisations engaged with CSDN. (See Table 3 below and Annex II for the list of participants).

Selection of individuals to interview was based on a cross-section of events which people had participated in. The consultant selected the following events to focus on:

- Policy meetings x 5:
  - 1 from Year 1 on peace mediation guidelines in November 2020
  - 2 from Year 2 on the role of social media in March 2022, and on 20 years after Gothenburg in Sept 2021
  - 2 from Year 3 on Enhancing EU Stabilisation Practice in Feb 2023, and Strategic Review of EUMM Georgia in Apr 2022
- Geographic meetings x1:
  - 1 from Year 3 on the Sahel in May 2022
- Funding instruments meeting x1:
  - 1 from Year 3 on Annual Action Programme 2023 in November 2022
- Training seminar x1:
  - 1 from Year 2 on Peacebuilding Advocacy towards the EU in April 2021

In some cases, targeted interviewees had attended more than one event, and therefore could respond to questions drawing on this wider experience.

Interviews were designed to examine key successes, challenges, and recommendations for future programming. Interviews were run in a semi-structured, conversational manner. This means that questions were developed for each group of interviewees and were used only as guides. The conversational style allowed for ideas and points to come up freely which may not come up in a fully-structured interview. The interviews were between 45 minutes and one hour in duration.

Organisation Type	Total number
European External Action Service	3
European Commission	3
Other EU institutions	1
Project Management Team	3
Brussels-based civil society	2
European-based civil society	4
Non-European-based civil society	1
International organisations	1
TOTAL	18

Table 4: Key informant interviewees by organisation type

Data analysis

Data analysis was conducted through an iterative process in tandem with data collection. This helped to identify gaps which would inform subsequent interviews, and to identify emerging trends and patterns. The main data analysis method used was thematic analysis, combining an inductive and deductive approach as the iterative process unfolded.

Once data collection was complete, a full data analysis was conducted which looked at all the data and how these aligned with the lines of inquiry and the objectives of CSDN. Additionally, themes and topics which were frequently raised that fell outside the framing of the lines of inquiry were discussed and further triangulated with an additional scan of the relevant documents.

Report writing and presentation

The initial findings were discussed with EPLO on 22nd May 2023 in a validation meeting prior to drafting the report. Then, the report was drafted with one round of review from EPLO. Finally, a presentation and discussion of findings and recommendations was delivered to EPLO as well as the EU's Programme Manager for CSDN, the Rapid Response Manager at FPI.

Limitations

There were four main limitations to the evaluation. First, there had been significant staff turnover in the EEAS during CSDN Phase IV, meaning that some institutional knowledge may have been lost. To overcome this challenge, the Consultant – with the support of EPLO – was able to interview two people who used to work on the project to help fill informational gaps, including the process of transition from CSDN Phase III to IV.

Second, not all those selected for interview were willing or available to participate in the process. This meant that some types of institution (such as EU Member States) were not represented at all in the evaluation, and some other types (such as non-European based civil society) were under-represented. The consultant – with support from EPLO – made every effort within the time available to identify alternative interviewees for each institution type, but this was not always possible. This was partly due to some potential interviewees stating that they had no or very little memory of attending the CSDN event, and would therefore be unable to respond to the interview questions. This may have been due to some CSDN events taking place online.

Due to practical time limitations, as well as the two limitiations noted above, it was not possible to interview the EU focal points for every CSDN event during this fourth phase. This, combined with limited outcome monitoring-efforts throughout the project period, meant that there was only partial information available on how the EU has used information arising from CSDN events to inform policy and practice.

Finally, this evaluation was initially scheduled to take place at the end of CSDN Phase IV, but a no-cost extension was requested during the evaluation period, likely extending the phase by a further three-months. Consequently, it was agreed between EPLO and the Consultant to not include the summary of quantitative data in this evaluation. Instead, the summary statistics on total numbers of events and participants will be included in the final project report.

III. Findings

In this section, findings related to each of the four outputs are presented, with examples and quotes[2] given where possible to illustrate each specific finding. The last section deals with cross-cutting monitoring, evaluation & learning, and management findings.

Output 1: CSDN's role as a mechanism for enabling civil society actors to engage in dialogue with EU policy-makers on issues relating to the EU's peacebuilding policies and practices is strengthened

Overall, the evaluation found that the work undertaken during Phase IV of CSDN has supported the achievement of this output. CSDN events were seen to be relevant to current and emerging topics in conflict prevention and peacebuilding. The events were organised and facilitated in a highly-effective manner, and adapted particularly well to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Greater clarity around the purpose of each meeting and how they connect to EU processes could help these meetings to have greater impact. Likewise, finding new ways to support safe spaces for divergent opinions to be shared on sensitive topics – even among a greater diversity of participants – could further deepen the impact of events. Knowledge and awareness of relevant issues was increased for participants through CSDN, but some reflection on how to add overarching dialogue themes and/or series of dialogue events could further help the sustainability and impact of CSDN.

The diversity of participants and quality of contributions enable CSDN events to be useful and insightful for all attendees.

Evaluation participants interviewed for this review highlighted the high calibre of participants at CSDN events. Of particular note for many evaluation participants was the ability of CSDN to bring in experts from conflict-affected countries to speak about conflict prevention and peacebuilding capacities and initiatives. This was found to be particularly important for EU officials, who may not otherwise have the opportunity to interact with context-specific civil society experts, and thus have limited opportunity outside of CSDN to listen to and learn from these perspectives. Further, all those interviewed said that CSDN events helped them to 'broaden their network', and/or 'connect with those outside of the Brussels bubble'.

It was also observed that the level of expertise of those allocated time to speak (including those called upon by EPLO) was often excellent, and this helped to attract senior participation from the EU. However, some EU evaluation participants felt that having access to the attendee list in advance would be helpful in attracting these additional decision makers. Furthermore, one evaluation participant noted that high-level decision makers were more likely to attend when the invite was received from an EU official, rather than from EPLO, suggesting that POG representatives and/or other EU counterparts could play a clearer role in supporting the preparation and invite process.

The use of the 'tour de table' in every meeting was highlighted by several evaluation participants (including those outside of EPLO) as a good technique to help give all participants the confidence to speak, and this resulted in stronger plenary discussions with more useful perspectives shared.

---

2 Quotes have in some cases been edited slightly to ensure readability and flow. Also, context-specific information has been removed to maintain the anonymity of respondents as agreed.

Overall, several evaluation participants from across the EU, CSOs, and EPLO staff noted that the quality of attendees was often directly linked to the amount of time and effort given to pre-meeting preparation. Selecting the right people to attend requires significant effort in terms of research, and often includes taking the time to speak to people in advance to determine their level of knowledge and ability to share relevant information.

Having clarity around the purpose of each CSDN is a key ingredient for a successful event.

This evaluation notes that all CSDN events which were said to have been the most useful in achieving practical policy changes in the EU had a clear purpose stated in advance. Each of these meetings had also been designed to feed into specific policy initiatives, with sufficient time in the process for this input to shape any outputs. Further details on the specific policy changes which CSDN has helped to influence can be found later in this report, under Output 4.

Where a clear purpose for a given meeting was missing or was not articulated to all meeting participants, this resulted in confusion over how any contributions from the meeting would be used by the EU. Feedback picked up through the document review, as well as from some civil society evaluation participants, indicates that where this clarity was missing, CSOs felt frustrated and some were left concerned that the CSDN dialogue process was designed to 'tick the consultation box' rather than to meaningfully contribute to EU policy, thinking, or ideas around conflict prevention and peacebuilding. In addition to this frustration, lack of clarity also prevented some participants from providing more detailed input, as they were unclear how sensitive information would be used.

Connections between meetings could help to strengthen the dialogue process.

The evaluation noted that there was limited continuity or connection between the different events organised under CSDN. This is largely because there was no formal mechanism to do so, and CSDN is currently mostly run as a dialogue and exchange mechanism for policy initiatives once they arise (via the POG). Although this approach is useful to feed into the development of specific policies, the lack of a sustained dialogue process means that opportunities for follow-up to track progress and/or to delve deeper into certain topics is missing.

Supporting such follow-up meetings could help civil society experts to see more clearly how any feedback is used by the EU, and could ultimately help to further improve the relevance of civil society input as it could be more likely to connect it to the ways of working within the EU. Also of note that some CSDN events can appear to civil society experts to be quite extractive, with little room provided for collective problem solving or meaningful dialogue which helps to "shift power" or to "move the dial" on key conflict or peacebuilding issues. The facilitation style adopted by CSDN (see below) have gone some way to address such issues during meetings, but post-meeting follow-up and/or follow-up meetings would help to improve understanding of how CSDN inputs have been used to inform any changes. Where meeting follow-ups are not possible, updates could still be shared via email or other means (by the EU, through EU reporting, and/or via EPLO).

CSDN events enable a range of views to be presented, but more could be done to overcome individual reluctance to share divergent opinions on sensitive topics.

CSDN has proven itself to be a "very unique mechanism to allow structured dialogue on really critical subjects related to conflict prevention and peacebuilding between civil society and the EU."

For EU officials who are closely involved in developing policy and attended associated CSDN meetings, those interviewed expressed their appreciation for participants who were well prepared and able to share specific feedback points during the CSDN process.

The frankness of the dialogue was noted by some as being a real strength of CSDN. Feedback specifically highlighted the Gothenburg CSDN meeting, which was heralded as a forum where there was a safe and positive space for reflections on what had worked and not worked across the previous 20 years of EU action related to conflict prevention and peacebuilding. This reflection enabled the identification of useful lessons learned and clear recommendations for the future.

However, it was noted by some evaluation participants that some meeting attendees may find it challenging to raise sensitive issues, even though it was acknowledged that the EU needed to hear a full range of perspectives to inform their policy or practice shifts. It was speculated that this reluctance on the part of attendees could be caused by several different factors:

- Competition between organisations, meaning individuals may be unwilling to share full and frank information at the expense of future funding opportunities.
- Individuals not knowing each other, and so feeling unable to share sensitive information (e.g. related to the context or different actors) for fear that this could be interpreted in the wrong way.
- Unwillingness to provide challenging feedback or inputs to the EU, for fear that this could affect current or future funding.
- Unwillingness to provide challenging feedback or inputs where their own line manager (or others further up the hierarchy) is present.

Overall, some meeting participants have found it easier to share information in "… a vague way so as not to be problematic." Consequently, having a diverse group of participants may not necessarily result in a diverse range of perspectives shared, and sometimes facilitating dialogue between EU and smaller groupings of civil society experts could be more beneficial, possibly through multiple events related to a single topic.

EPLO staff themselves noted that when they observed conflicting viewpoints shared during CSDN, this was often a sign of a highly successful meeting. This difference of opinion can be a proxy indicator for demonstrating that 'the right people, the right diversity of participants' have attended, and they have felt able to share those views. CSDN is not designed to seek consensus, but, for the reasons outlined above, participants can be reluctant to stand out.

The facilitation style adopted by CSDN & the quality of facilitators was praised highly.

Regardless of organisational affiliation, role, seniority, or the format of the meeting, all evaluation participants noted that they found CSDN events to be informative, and that they often inspired change or prompted the making of further connections.

> "[Overall], the facilitation enabled the opportunity to be informed, educated, and inspired."

Specific characteristics identified as key ingredients of this success include the following:

- A 'house style' for facilitation which uses a constructive approach as the basis of discussion.
- Tour de table (as already noted above) provides an early opportunity for all to speak, and so can give confidence to participants to make further substantive inputs during the meeting.
- Advance preparation by EPLO to give staff in-depth understanding of who can speak on what topic, and for EPLO facilitators to use this to call on the 'unusual suspects' present in the meeting.
- Breakout groups create a less formal environment for discussion to take place, which can help those less confident to speak in the plenary. Breakout groups also enable more in-depth discussion to take place on specific sub-themes or contexts.

- A good agenda, and clear guiding questions which are shared in advance help people to prepare, and so facilitate higher-quality inputs.
- The most interesting inputs often come from experts from conflict affected countries. It is notable that this feedback was shared by all EU officials interviewed.
- Allowing sufficient time for discussion (not just presentations or prepared responses by EU officials) facilitates a richer dialogue and exchange of views.
- Ability to offer real-time translation for online and in-person meetings for up to 3 languages.
- Allowing time at the end for a meeting synthesis to help capture key thoughts, and this is also useful for the meeting report.

Where meetings have worked less well, this seems to be related to the need for clarity of purpose and process (as noted above), as well as to the quality of contributions made. While some civil society representatives noted that they had found some CSDN events to be useful to inform their own knowledge around the EU and the meeting's particular topic, some EU representatives said that when many participants are junior or are there to learn, this can affect the quality of the discussion, and can deter EU officials from attending future events. Two evaluation participants also noted that breakout group facilitators were not always as good as the main plenary facilitators; in some meetings the breakout group facilitators are external, and so not from EPLO. The EPLO staff workshop confirmed that in light of internal reflection and lessons learned, breakout groups are now being facilitated by EPLO staff, and a future phase will include additional facilitation training to boost capacity.

The Training Seminars were also reported (through the document review as well as the evaluation interviews) as being very good. Training participants provided feedback that it was practical, highly relevant to participant needs, and an opportunity to learn from and network with others within the CP/PB community. Further, participants valued the opportunity to meet with and interact with EU officials.

With WHO officially declaring the end of the Covid-19 global health emergency, now is the time to consider the future of online, hybrid and in-person meetings.

During CSDN Phase IV, events have been held online, in-person, and in hybrid format. Defining what works best for CSDN, for different groups of participants or for different types of meetings is a difficult task. Evaluation participants interviewed for this report identified a number of competing concerns.

Overall, most felt that there were clear benefits to opting for online meetings some of the time (but none felt that such a format would work all of the time). It was noted that an online format could suit specific types of events in particular. The key type referenced was the CSDP Strategic Review Meetings, as they are often concluded within 2 hours. One person also noted that they found it easier to pose questions to EU officials and to participate when the event was online. This was because they found it easier to write rather than speak their question, and they felt that the speaker was more likely to respond to a written question, and more likely to leave early when the meeting was held in-person.

The feedback on the use of hybrid meetings was significantly more mixed. Some felt that climate considerations and the time taken to travel for in-person meetings meant that hybrid was more likely to be the norm going forward, and that it would be important to ensure proper adaptation to this format. Some felt that hybrid allowed more and a greater diversity of people to participate. However, others felt that hybrid meetings were the worst of both worlds. Some noted that hybrid format created a power imbalance between those online and those in the room. Specific CSDN feedback on the Gothenburg meeting (which was the first CSDN attempt at using a hybrid format)

noted that it often "felt like two rooms talking to each other". In another hybrid meeting[3], according to feedback, people online participated but not as fully as might have been the case if it had been in-person; plus online participants missed the networking opportunities available during the coffee break. This evaluation recommends seeking expert advice and investing properly to manage any future hybrid events. Other ideas given by evaluation participants include:

- Ensure a dedicated facilitator is allocated to the online group, and a separate dedicated facilitator for the in-person group.
- Ensure all participants – whether online or in-person – connect to the video call and are visible throughout the meeting. This enables all to use the chat function equally.
- Consider ways of running the online group and in-person groups consecutively, rather than simultaneously, allowing one to feed into the other.
- Consider ways of making the event more interactive, including continuing/prioritising the use of breakout groups to support more in-depth discussion.
- Distribute guidelines for how to successfully participate in hybrid meetings in advance, so that all participants are aware of any expectations.

Several others noted that if an online option had not been available, then they would not have attended the meeting at all. This was true for high-level EU officials as well as for civil society experts not based in Brussels. One person noted that what might be lost in terms of in-person networking could be made up for in other ways, including through this greater diversity of participants.

Overall, all evaluation participants noted the value of in-person meetings and the opportunity for networking these provide. CSDN events which are designed to support active networking, including Training Seminars and Funding Instruments Meetings, were noted as having clear benefits when held in-person. Feedback included:

"[CSDN events] are … so much more powerful when [people] can have that chat in the coffee break."

"In-person [is a] great way to do networking. Think it is an extremely important tool to enhance dialogue between NGOs and EEAS."

"Real conversations take place in person."

"CSDN works particularly well when face to face. The power and strength of it is that it is not just another Skype meeting. It is an in-person gathering. And this then becomes distinct from the multiple online convenings."

"Funding to support participants to join in-person meetings from conflict-affected contexts has been vital to enable their voices to be heard and for them to engage as experts in dialogue with the EU."

While it is hard to find complete consensus on the best format for all participants and all types of meetings, it is reasonable to conclude that there are clear benefits to online meetings and to in-person meetings, with both able to work well with careful planning and facilitation. However, hybrid meetings are harder to run and pose different challenges for effective engagement. Any future CSDN phase should consider allocating additional resources to research, plan and deliver such meetings in a different way to the current norm.

---

[3] The specific meeting is not named to support evaluation participant anonymity.

Output 2: The capacities of civil society actors involved in CSDN activities to contribute to the EU's peacebuilding policies and practices are increased

Overall, the evaluation found that work undertaken during Phase IV of CSDN has supported the achievement of this output. CSDN events were seen as being relevant to civil society actors looking to increase their knowledge and understanding of the EU, and to connect with EU officials directly. The training in particular has proved to be highly effective for enhancing CSO capacity. Some CSOs have adapted the way they engage with the EU as a result of CSDN (both through specific connections made, and through increased knowledge of what works). Further, some CSOs noted an impact from CSDN on their overall approach to and understanding of conflict prevention and peacebuilding. However, greater project sustainability could be considered through a more effective social media and public outreach strategy, as the current use of videos (whilst high quality in themselves) is a little ad hoc.

CSDN is a great vehicle for CSOs to connect with EU officials and understand how the EU operates.

Civil society participants have provided overwhelmingly positive feedback through participant surveys and through this evaluation on the relevance and effectiveness of CSDN in supporting their own understanding of and connections with the EU.

In particular, for those based outside of Brussels, CSDN and EPLO are invaluable tools for CSOs to follow developments in EU policy and practice. Without this, many would not be able to stay up to date on EU policies or funding opportunities. Furthermore, for many CSOs, CSDN events present their only opportunity to interact directly with EU officials.

Specific feedback included:

"I had just joined [organisation], so the CSDN event was a great opportunity to meet EU officials who were focused on conflict prevention and peacebuilding. [I] saw it as a door opening exercise with the EU. And the content [of the meeting] was really good too."

"[The value of CSDN] is in its ability to form a collective voice amongst peacebuilding organisations. And to use that voice to try to influence EU policy making."

"As [a senior CSO representative], I can expect to meet with the ambassador at delegation level. However, it is much harder to do this in Brussels. CSDN enables me and my colleagues to engage with relatively senior diplomats in Brussels."

Civil society representatives interviewed for this evaluation referred to the difficulty of engaging EU officials outside of CSDN. Most reported finding it extremely difficult or impossible to secure bilateral meetings with any EU official. Therefore, for many, CSDN is the only opportunity they have to ask questions directly and to listen to EU perspectives. Some have also been able to use CSDN as a way to build direct relationships with EU officials, though most found this hard to sustain, particularly with staff turnover at the EU.

Civil society participants also value the opportunity to connect with each other.

Although the primary purpose of CSDN is to connect civil society with EU officials, it also functions as a good connection and networking resource among civil society participants. Feedback received and

reviewed through this evaluation noted the importance of these connections to "not find oneself in the same echo chamber." Many have also used this opportunity to make new connections with partner organisations, hear interventions from conflict-affected individuals, connect with others across continents, and to use these connections to form active partnerships and, in one case, a joint funding bid. Specific feedback included:

"Through the meeting, we were able to engage with new people. This helped us to develop our own priorities and plans for this year and shaped our focus for conflict prevention and early warning."

"And the discussions [in the Training Seminar] were really great. This is the most important aspect of CSDN. [There was] quite a diverse group of people, with some from Brussels, others from Africa, and some working in different parts of the world. It was great to analyse and hear more about what they were working on."

Knowledge and understanding amongst CSOs has been built through training & events.

CSDN has directly strengthened knowledge and understanding of EU policies and practices in civil society. Those attending the training reflected on the quality of the content provided during the training as well as the reading material provided in advance:

"[The content has] really helped me to understand the different dynamics within the EU. Having a more crystallised overview [enables me to] be more selective for influencing efforts and [allows me to] prioritise my time and how to use EPLO efficiently."

"Hearing from other EPLO members on how they engage the EU and what works in Brussels, has influenced our own advocacy approach."

"As a representative from a small organisation, CSDN allows us to get a more concrete understanding for relevant entry points to engage with the EU for advocacy."

"Having in-person training events works well as the networking with EPLO colleagues, EPLO members, and EU officials is so valuable."

"The presentations from EPLO were fantastic. I have [kept the information and the materials] in my special folder so I can consult it all the time. I find this very useful."

Several evaluation participants noted that the content provided through the Funding Instruments Meeting was invaluable, particularly following the recent shifts to Global Europe and the introduction of the NDICI. Civil society participants have re-used those materials in their own funding strategies, advocacy strategies, and have shared them with colleagues across different teams and locations. One evaluation participant noted that "this information helped us to centre and to focus. The EU is a massive institution, and it is easy to get caught in the weeds."

Another noted that: "there are many layers to peacebuilding at the EU, with many people, offices, geographies, and themes involved. It is easy to get lost in this if you try to engage with all of them. EPLO filters this for us, and we can then select the most relevant resources and connections."

Several evaluation participants referenced the importance of EPLO newsletters and the website as being a "great resource" where updates related to different geographies, thematic areas, and funding opportunities are shared. Individual organisations do not have the capacity to do this. EPLO and CSDN are resources for the conflict prevention and peacebuilding community to understand

what is happening at the EU, though improving the website user interface would be beneficial for ease of access.

Some CSOs changed their own policies and practices as a result of CSDN.

For civil society participants engaging in CSDN meetings, their use of the information and connections shared can vary greatly. For those who are already active in EU policy work and engaging at the Brussels level, CSDN presents an opportunity to widen that network and deepen their understanding of how decisions are made across complex EU structures and cultures. For example, one respondent noted that the Training Seminar emphasised the importance of engaging with Assistants to MEPs as a way of reaching and influencing MEPs. Another respondent recalled that the Training Seminar included developing an actor map for relevant individuals and EU institutions, and that they continue to use this map with their own EU policy work. For staff across EPLO member organisations who are less familiar with EU structures, the materials shared by EPLO have been of great value to help "decode the EU, and this has been particularly useful for our colleagues working in conflict-affected contexts."

For others, CSDN events presented an opportunity to deepen their knowledge and understanding around conflict prevention and peacebuilding work. One country-focused participant reflected that an event had helped to "broaden their understanding and to think about the work from a regional and global perspective." Another participant in a policy meeting noted that it had prompted a wider reflection within their own team as to how to apply the principles and issues discussed at a regional level, and that this thinking had informed their broader regional strategy. A third respondent noted that they were able to listen to EU speakers in the Funding Instruments Meeting and understand in more detail how the EU was planning to fund and engage local civil society, and the challenges the EU faces in supporting this shift to local actors. This information has informed and validated that CSO's own Theory of Change related to strengthening local capacities, and improved how the organisation supports local actors to connect with the EU.

Engaging people through social media and videos is important, but a future phase could incorporate clear goals and an outreach strategy.

A total of 7 videos have been produced during Years 1 and 2 of CSDN Phase IV. However, these videos have not yet reached the viewing targets set in the logframe (1,418 views compared to a target of 4,500). This evaluation notes the absence of any engagement strategy for social media or the use of videos, and no plan was made for any of the videos articulating their purpose, audience, overall messaging, or dissemination strategy. Several evaluation participants reflected on the continued and growing importance of social media and online content (including videos) and noted that this could be a method for future CSDNs to engage a greater diversity of people and a broader range of CSOs, including those led by and for young people.

Output 3: EPLO's capacity to manage CSDN through its networking, coordination, and policy functions is strengthened

Overall, the evaluation found that work undertaken during Phase IV of CSDN has supported the achievement of this output. EPLO has proven itself to be an effective and efficient lead for CSDN, and this evaluation establishes that there is a significant level of trust both between the EU and EPLO and between CSOs and EPLO which allows this project to function well. The team's rapid and thoughtful adaptation to Covid was highly commended. To some extent the switch to online meetings has reduced the lead-in time for CSDN meetings, and this has sometimes impacted the quality of research and preparation, including the time needed to identify expert participants.

Preparation for CSDN, including time for research and outreach with relevant actors, is critical.

As noted previously in reference to other outputs, the expertise of participants and the content shared is of critical importance to the quality and relevance of each CSDN event. EPLO staff and EU officials engaged through POG recognise the significant time required to research organisations (including those outside the existing EPLO network), and to reach out to potential participants to gauge their level of interest and knowledge. Equally, evaluation participants recognised the importance to EU officials of the EU being involved in drawing up the invite list, as well as allowing sufficient lead-in time to enable the right invitees to be identified and given sufficient notice.

It was also noted that prior to Covid, at least 2-3 in-person preparation meetings would take place prior to any CSDN event. However, the onset of Covid has led to a gear shift in the turnaround time of events. This has enabled EPLO to deliver additional CSDN events and to include a greater diversity of participants (who may otherwise have required visas and travel time to attend in-person Brussels events), which is an advantage. However, in some cases the reduced time available has reduced the possibility of in-depth planning with the EU, and has reduced CSDN's ability to understand the policy, the process, and the purpose of the event, and to plan the event to help meet EU objectives for civil society dialogue.

To illustrate the importance of preparation when creating invite lists, one example was given of a Geographic Meeting in which an EU official involved with civil society engagement had not been consulted on the invite list and knew little about the meeting in advance. Had any consultations taken place, additional civil society actors could have been included in the meeting, providing a greater diversity of participants from relevant organisations. The evaluation only produced one such example, suggesting it does not reflect the norm. But it is highlighted here to demonstrate the importance of time, preparation, and consultation to ensure CSDN events are as high quality as possible.

Overall, EU officials welcome the time and preparation put in by EPLO and recognise that it would not be possible or realistic for them to achieve the same level of engagement if these events were delivered in-house. As one evaluation participant noted:

> "One added value is around the preparation which takes place before the meeting which is very much welcomed across the EU house by all colleagues. It's a good thing and a clear added value of CSDN."

Participants valued the diversity of representation and perspectives shared during CSDNs, but in light of recent sectoral shifts related to diversity, equality and inclusion, more could still be done.

Supporting conflict-affected countries in conflict prevention and peacebuilding requires a nuanced understanding of conflict and peace dynamics. CSDN plays a vital role in assisting the EU to engage with a diversity of experts with a range of knowledge and experience, which can feed into CSDN analysis and exchange. For CSDN IV, the diversity of perspectives was frequently cited as a valued factor, particularly the inclusion of experts from conflict-affected contexts. With regards to gender equality, the participant mix in Years 1 and 2 was 42% male and 57% female.

Additionally, the facilitation style adopted in CSDN allows diverse voices to be heard and to participate during meetings. However, as noted during the EPLO staff workshop, more could be done in any subsequent phase to consider additional diversity factors and widening participation, including the possibility of introducing payment for participation, and greater consideration of accessibility in the context of online, hybrid and in-person events.

The EPLO team rapidly and successfully adapted to Covid-19 and ensured quality CSDN events continued online.

The EPLO team and key personnel working on CSDN were quick to respond to the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic and rapidly acquired the skills, tools, and plans for delivering online events in a safe and structured manner which supported a high-quality dialogue process. This swift but thoughtful adaptation process was praised highly by the evaluation participants who were connected with CSDN at that time. Key initiatives undertaken by CSDN to support this included:

- Made the case for using Zoom over Webex to enable participants with low-bandwidth internet connections or those joining from mobile phones to connect more easily.
- Enabled training for staff on the use of Zoom and on good practices for online/hybrid facilitation, particularly around the security implications of the software and managing safe spaces for dialogue online.
- Researched and tested online meeting practices and planned the structure and protocols for the events around this new research and learning.
- Researched, tested, and ran simultaneous interpretation tools for online meetings.
- Kept the meetings to a maximum length of 90 minutes in the beginning, increasing to 2-hours later. This maximum length is the recommended limit for participant engagement with online events.
- Ensured sufficient numbers of colleagues were online and that each had a clear role for event management.
- Asked participants to keep cameras on during meetings.
- Used interactive tools, such as post-it notes or Google Docs, in appropriate meetings.

This significant adaptation during the first year of CSDN IV was time intensive for EPLO staff, particularly in terms of additional time required for research, participant selection and outreach. Re-designing 1 or 2-day in-person meetings to fit into a 90-minute online slot while keeping them relevant, useful, and impactful on EU policy and practice represents a major success of this phase of work.

Output 4: EU policymakers' and civil society actors' understanding of issues relating to peacebuilding and conflict prevention, and the EU's role in them is increased

Overall, the evaluation found that work undertaken during Phase IV of CSDN has supported the achievement of this output. CSDN events had a practical and direct influence on specific EU policies, guidelines, and information notes related to policies and practice on conflict prevention and peacebuilding issues. However, more could be done to track such changes to support overall programme effectiveness, and further consideration could be given to reaching additional EU officials and institutions who are not working directly on conflict and peacebuilding issues.

CSDN inputs are used by the EU to inform policy and practices, which in turn improves the EU's role in conflict prevention and peacebuilding.

It is widely acknowledged across the EU that for effective policymaking, it is important to exchange opinions with and receive inputs from civil society actors working in and on conflict prevention and peacebuilding initiatives. CSDN is designed for this function, and this evaluation found several positive examples through key informant interviews in which there is a stated link between the CSDN and changes made in final policy, guidelines or other documents being developed by the EU.

Additional outcome monitoring processes during the full period of CSDN Phase IV could help to identify further examples.

Policy Meeting: Peace Mediation Guidelines: Expert working meeting. *Online Policy Meeting with 22 participants (9 male, 13 female) for 0.25 days on 4 November 2020*

Feedback related to this meeting included the following points:
- The EU was keen to receive feedback from the NGO community, as "they are the ones to implement peace mediation efforts at the local level", and one official noted that often CSDN meetings can be important to "open our eyes around ideas that we would not [otherwise] have thought of."
- This meeting built on a previous meeting held in the summer, and another from 2019. Overall, the feedback was used to inform the final Concept and Guidelines.
- In this case, the EU referred to the CSDN meeting report to "scan through for any new ideas or viewpoints that we [had] not thought about." As a result, the "guidelines greatly benefitted from CSDN".
- Specific changes which were made because of CSDN included the integration of NGO suggestions on psycho-social support, supporting inclusion of women and youth in mediation efforts, and the importance of local dialogue instead of elite-centric conversations.

How can peacebuilding actors counter disinformation? Perspectives from civil society (Introductory Meeting) *Online Policy Meeting with 42 participants (17 male, 25 female) for 0.25 days on 25 June 2021*

Feedback related to this meeting included the following points:
- The idea for this meeting stemmed from several different discussions which took place across FPI and EEAS, plus a growing interest in the topic from regional teams and IcSP.
- The aim of the meeting was to convene EPLO members and others. This was partly in response to some of the frequent requests for bilateral meetings and pitches from EPLO members on this topic, and partly to bring StratComms teams within the EU on board, to help sensitise them to how the peacebuilding sector views social media and disinformation.
- Ultimately, the meeting was useful for understanding the details of what each organisation was working on, to draw on this expertise, and to share lessons learned amongst this broad group.
- This first meeting on disinformation was quite broad in scope; it looked at social media and impacts on social dynamics, and explored different entry points for change.
- Feedback raised through the meeting was then used to shape future meetings. Specifically, on the theme of social media (see below).

The role of social media in preventing electoral violence: Perspectives from civil society. *Online Policy Meeting with 43 participants (26 male, 17 female) for 0.25 days on 17 March 2022*

Feedback related to this meeting included the following points:
- The purpose of the meeting was to gather civil society input and ideas, and to use this to inform the final report of an expert engaged by the EU.
- The meeting was useful. The recommendations plus the final meeting report were used by the EU's expert to inform their own final report. However, feedback noted that the meeting report could helpfully have included a verbatim account of the meeting.
- Another evaluation participant noted that there could have been more preparatory work to identify and invite additional peace tech CSO experts, to bring different perspectives to the meeting. In this case, CSDN could have benefited from an external expert to support the development of the agenda and the invite list.

- This expert report has since been used to develop an information note which has now been shared (in March 2023) with EU delegations[4] on preventing election violence.
- Specific points raised through CSDN which informed the information note include:
  o Consideration of the relationship between traditional media and social media.
  o How to use social media constructively to support prevention of violence. This was an important feedback point, as the EU had been keen to avoid only a negative perspective on social media.
  o The importance of Codes of Conduct for political parties and the media; there was also discussion of the challenges around monitoring and implementing the CoCs.

Furthermore, two previous outcome monitoring reviews conducted during CSDN Phase IV can be found online, with summary findings included below.

**The Cultural Heritage Policy Meeting for CSDN delivered in March 2021** was used to inform the final Concept on cultural heritage in conflicts and crises, adopted in June 2021. The rapid evaluation, conducted in March 2022 found the following:

1. The EEAS remarked that *"The Cultural Heritage CSDN was a very important tool within the overall consultation process to develop the Cultural Heritage Concept".*
2. Although CSDN did not radically alter the overall policy direction of the Concept, there were several examples of CSDN influence. Specifically, the **EEAS drew on CSDN inputs to re-frame the tone of the Concept using positive peace language.**
3. There was **great value in convening experts from the fields of peacebuilding and cultural heritage** and this engagement has been sustained to some extent after the event.
4. Feedback was overwhelmingly positive for the Chair and the management of the meeting itself. For EEAS, their aim was to *"… **be in listening mode with civil society experts. We achieved that. And for that, CSDN was very positive."***

**The Horn of Africa (HoA) Geographic Meeting for CSDN delivered in June 2020** was used to connect CSOs with the EU to reflect and exchange ideas on the peace and security situation in the HoA in the context of the Covid-19 crisis. The rapid evaluation, conducted in March 2021 found the following:

Taking the full context into account, it is certain that there was sincere appreciation for EPLO's organisation of this CSDN meeting from EU counterparts. From a project perspective, this was also viewed as a continuation of the high quality of delivery under the CSDN mechanism.

Behind-the-scenes design work carried out by EPLO staff is always crucial to the success of CSDN meetings, but it may well be even more important for online meetings where time is limited and impactful dialogue is harder to facilitate.

Participation in this meeting was perceived as more one-sided, with INGOs contributing most to the discussions. In some ways, this is a format more typically seen with formal EU-organised civil society consultations. However, in this instance, part of the value of the meeting was the timing, and the ability to access the experiences and analysis of INGOs based in the region in real time, at a moment when physical meetings were impossible and interactions between EU stakeholders and INGOs in the region were almost entirely disrupted.

A notable internal EPLO outcome from the meeting was the strengthening of ties between civil society groups working on complementary or parallel issue areas. This has value for the EPLO network as it expands the number of people within member organisations who are engaging with EU policymaking and also raises awareness of EU external action in the region.

---

[4] Initially, the EU has shared this note with delegations facing elections in the next 1-2 years.

Finally, the role of CSDN POG in joint decision-making between EU and EPLO demonstrated its value as a means of assuring the relevance of CSDN meetings. The experience of EPLO staff in designing these processes meant that the POG could confidently mobilise in an unsettled period and assess the advantages and limitations of the format to design achievable but valuable outcomes.

CSDN reaches a good number and diversity of participants. However, more could still be done to broaden to new audiences and to engage the EU in new ways.

Overall, evaluation participants commended the time taken to research and develop the meeting participant list. However, many also had suggestions for how to broaden this reach further. Some felt it important for CSDN to broaden the reach as the dialogue process "was often talking to the converted", and in the fourth phase of CSDN it was not enough to continue working in the same way.

Others felt that key points of influence within the EU were not being fully reached, with geographic units receiving several mentions from all categories of evaluation participants as important teams to influence, particularly relating to practice shifts. However, as EPLO does not work directly in-country, this is likely to require stronger organisational involvement from EPLO members and/or POG representatives from the EU. During this evaluation, it was noted that while some delegations organised CSO outreach meetings, these were more likely to be focused on sharing funding opportunities and creating networking space amongst CSOs. It was noted that it was rarer for delegations to facilitate dialogue with multiple CSOs around sensitive issues, and so there could be a role for CSDN to support this. CSDN has organised such a meeting in earlier phases around the Sahel and Lake Chad, aimed at gathering CSO regional analysis and perceptions of EU engagement. One evaluation participant noted that this meeting could not have taken place if it had not been for the neutral nature of CSDN. Further thinking around how and when to engage geographic units could be factored into a future CSDN phase.

Furthermore, several evaluation participants mentioned the importance of engaging member states (MS), particularly in their role as budget providers for the EU. It was noted that MS officials rarely attend (even if invited), and when they do, it tends only to be those from Sweden or other MS already supportive of the conflict prevention and peacebuilding fields. Again, while some efforts have been made to engage MS, more could be done in a future CSDN phase to consider if there are alternative outreach and engagement strategies which would be worth adopting, such as tailored CSDN Member State Meetings (rather than trying to include them in the existing Geographic or Policy meeting schedule). As EU officials noted difficulties in securing buy-in from MS around key policies and documents related to conflict prevention and peacebuilding, CSDN could play a more proactive role in trying to address this. There is potential for CSDN to consider alternative means for reaching these audiences (such as videos or social media), but as mentioned earlier, any outreach and engagement efforts needs to be tailored to the target audience. Furthermore, any engagement of EU officials beyond those who are conflict or peace focused needs to consider what their incentives for engaging might be and take account of this in planning and messaging.

Finally, Phase IV included several CSDN events held outside of Brussels (a Member State Meeting on the "EU Approach to Women, Peace and Security: Lessons Identified and Way Forward" in Stockholm, an NGO Roundtable in Barcelona, and an NGO Roundtable and a Training Seminar in Bologna). These were viewed positively and provided opportunities to link with additional CSOs not normally reached with Brussels events. Covid-19 prevented additional non-Brussels meetings taking place, but there is scope and interest to revisit this in future phases, as previous CSDN phases had demonstrated success with meetings in Kenya, Uganda, Myanmar, and elsewhere.

Crosscutting findings

Monitoring, Evaluation & Learning

Data collection for monitoring and evaluation is heavily weighted in favour of the quantitative.

The consultant notes that the current approach to data collection for monitoring and evaluation is heavily weighted in favour of the quantitative: the number of events, participants, and the disaggregated breakdown of data by gender, type of meeting, and type of participant.

Not all planned information-gathering for reflective learning on the wider process of the project and tracking progress towards outcomes was realised.

Not all planned information-gathering for reflective learning on the wider process of the project and tracking progress towards outcomes was realised. Specifically, the project budget foresaw six outcome monitoring reports to track EU policy shifts in response to CSDN events, yet only two took place. In part, this could be due to the effects of Covid-19 and the focus within CSDN Phase IV on adapting to them. However, more could be done in a future phase to understand this tool better, and to ensure that learning can capture all results and policy influence.

Response rates for participant surveys remained persistently low throughout CSDN Phase IV, most likely due to the shift to hybrid and online meetings.

Each event features a participant survey to capture process feedback on the relevance and effectiveness of the meeting. However, the response rate has remained persistently low throughout CSDN Phase IV, most likely due to the shift to hybrid and online meetings. Furthermore, in previous phases there had been a greater number of participants who attended thanks to the support of CSDN funding, and these participants were more likely to complete the survey.

The POG meetings are output focused with limited (or no) discussion of wider shifts and progress towards policy/practice change.

Although the POG did discuss the limited participant survey response rate (during the meetings which took place on 14 October 2021 and 30 June 2022), there is no documentation or recollection of any consequent changes to the survey system meant to boost response rates. Overall, the POG meetings appear quite output focused with a focus on numbers achieved, and the receipt of feedback from key CSO or EU officials who attended. However, no minutes reflect analysis or actions from this feedback; discussion of how the EU may have used the content or materials arising from the event; reflections on the facilitation style and suitability of the meeting format for different participants; or any discussion of project risks or mitigation strategies employed.

Project Oversight & Management

Overall, evaluation participants found EPLO and its staff helpful, engaging, and hard-working behind the scenes, engaging with the EU on behalf of a broad network of CSOs. EPLO is viewed by many as 'an essential organisation', with no individual member organisation 'able to engage with the EU in the same way or at the same level'. EU officials also noted the continued relevance of EPLO in supporting effective civil society engagement with the EU:

> *"… We need EPLO as they know what the EU does, they know what works and what doesn't work for engaging with us, [they know] what not to do, and why. [They know] what has been tried in the past and why things may have failed. They know how to influence change. EPLO knows all of this."*

The POG functions; but the group could reflect more on progress & play a larger role in enhancing EU connections.

The POG is a useful mechanism to connect key project stakeholders (two EPLO Steering Committee members, one EC FPI official, one EEAS ISP official, plus EPLO staff), to steer specific CSDN events, and to support the pipeline for new events. However, as noted in the Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning section above, these discussions could include monitoring both feedback from events and qualitative progress towards EU policy and practice shifts.

Furthermore, the ToR for the POG could be reviewed and amended to provide greater support in connecting with EU officials, and in improving visibility to and connections with institutions not currently reached by CSDN. Furthermore, consideration could be given to how CSDN's reports and materials are shared across the EU to support wider knowledge management and awareness of the importance of EU consultation and active engagement with CSOs.

There has been a high rate of staff turnover in EEAS and FPI during CSDN Phase IV .

During three years of CSDN Phase IV, the FPI Programme Manager has changed four times, and the Supervisor of the Programme Manager has changed twice. These changes have coincided with wider structural and leadership shifts within FPI. Many public and private sector institutions have experienced similar high rates of staff turnover, particularly in the wake of Covid-19. While this evaluation does not seek to make recommendations related to this, it does nonetheless note that this rapid and frequent turnover has meant that additional staff time has been required from EPLO to ensure CSDN functions effectively and efficiently throughout the whole programme period.

While new ideas have been considered and tried to some extent, any related to dialogue and engagement should be grounded in a clear strategy.

Any project successfully completing its fourth phase and twelfth year of operation would encounter difficulties in identifying, testing, and implementing new ideas. Often, ideas proposed have been tried before and not worked. This is certainly true for CSDN, where suggestions made by evaluation participants – including engaging Member States, hosting meetings in the region or outside of Brussels, and changes to the facilitation style – have all previously been tried with varying degrees of success. Some additional ideas which were included in the logframe – such as Peacebuilding Awards – were not trialled, partly due to the significant Covid-19-related restrictions in place globally.

However, it is also important to note that any 'new' ideas to create a more 'dynamic' CSDN approach needs to be weighed against the strategic relevance of such activities to the overall objective of enhancing the EU's approach to conflict prevention and peacebuilding. The novelty factor alone does not guarantee such relevance. Overall, before the development of any new CSDN phase, thought should be given to this overall strategic approach. Stepping back from assumptions about the project format and audiences could be a helpful way to reimagine how civil society can effectively engage the EU in its decision-making process. Any new outreach, engagement, or dialogue ideas should be clearly connected to an overall strategy for specific audiences and processes, with a clear reason for using CSDN as the mechanism to make this connection.

IV.   Recommendations

Recommendations related to strategy:

• For CSDN to work with EU interlocuters (through POG, and with wider EU consultation) to consider how to **influence a greater diversity and number of EU institutions and officials**, to promote improved conflict prevention and peacebuilding interventions in EU budgets, decisions, policies and practices. This includes consideration of:
- Member States
- European Parliament
- European Council
- DG NEAR and broadening reach within DG INTPA
- Strategic Communications

• For the CSDN team and POG to consider ways of **curating and facilitating an overarching dialogue process** which goes beyond single meetings **to inform and influence broader strategic aims** of relevance to the peace and conflict community.

• For the POG to **ensure there is sufficient time and preparation** to enable additional EU officials to engage meaningfully in CSDN events, including those from any additional institutions identified through the recommendation on expanding influence above.

Recommendations related to the format and content of CSDN events:

• To consider **different categories and formats for CSDN events** to give a greater degree of flexibility, and to suit different topics, logistical needs, and types of processes. This could include (but is not limited to):
- Small group meetings.
- High-level meetings.
- Online and in-person meetings running consecutively, rather than concurrently.
- Open format brownbag lunches on-site in EC buildings.
- In-person meetings returning to an all-day schedule (or run over two consecutive days) to support a greater level of networking.
- In-person meetings outside of Brussels (including within Belgium, across Europe, and/or in conflict-affected contexts).
- Training seminars run outside of Brussels, such as in Nairobi or Amman, to increase participation rates for those from or based in conflict-affected contexts. Training events could also be organised for 'advanced' participants and/or 'basic/introductory courses'.

• If hybrid meetings are held, then it is critical to develop an improved method of delivery. At a minimum, this would require an **investment in new audio/visual technology** (see this article for some examples). Further points to consider:
- Additional time required for preparation and testing of such events.
- Potentially engaging a tech partner to sponsor and/or manage the A/V components of hybrid events.
- Provision of A/V equipment to support the event.

• For CSDN and POG to continue to **consider new topics for future CSDNs**. Some such topics may require engagement with specialised partners outside the usual EPLO network, which would also necessitate additional time for research and outreach. CSDN should ensure topics proposed by EPLO and its members are relevant to the EU, with 2-3 of these topics taken up each year. Future topics could include:

- Defense spending and military support in conflict prevention and peacebuilding.
- Migration in conflict prevention and peacebuilding.
- Consultation (in coordination with Civil Society Advisors at delegation level) on conflict analysis screenings in conflict-affected contexts (possibly with a focus on complex and/or strategic contexts).
- Practice-focused meetings. These could consider how to bridge the gap between policy and practice, and consider different perspectives from those present and implementing in different contexts. For example: conflict-sensitive reconstruction in Ukraine.
- For CSDN events taking place in conflict-affected contexts: thematic issues of regional significance, such as Horn of Africa climate change developments.

• For the CSDN team and POG to consider how to **support a greater level of follow-up to ensure participants have better access to information** on how input from CSDN has been used by the EU to inform any Concept or other policy document**.** Aside from any email updates sent to previous participants, CSDN could also consider holding 'follow-on' CSDN events as standard practice for Policy Meetings, reconvening participants after 12-18 months to discuss progress and the extent to which policy has translated into practice changes.

Recommendations related to diversity and inclusion of participants:

• To continue to **make improvements in the area of Diversity, Equality, and Inclusion** to support the full **participation of a broader range of people.** Specifically:
- Seek advice and support from relevant EPLO Members on best practice in integrating measures into policy work, and on considerations for ensuring meetings are an accessible and safe space for all (whether online, in-person, or hybrid).
- Ensure there are adequate resources in place to support any proposal arising from any external advice, such as funding participation costs (particularly for local CSO experts), access grants, etc.
- Ensure adequate time for meeting preparation to put in place agreed inclusion measures.
- Track and measure the effectiveness of initiatives through both disaggregated data collection, and a qualitative feedback and consultation processes.

• For the CSDN team and POG to **consider allowing more time and resources to identify relevant context-focused CSOs,** and to more fully consider how to **overcome any barriers to meaningful participation they may face.** Aside from language and location logistics, this includes consideration of power balances where local CSOs are funded by INGOs (often in turn funded by the EU), or restrictions on speaking freely in front of those they do not know.

Recommendations related to new ideas for CSDN Phase V:

• To **consider new outreach and engagement methods to connect with a broader range of audiences with relevant messages**. Ideas raised through this evaluation included the following:
- Seek advice and support from relevant EPLO Members on best practice in:
  o Using digital outreach and social media tools to proactively engage young people across European Member States as key future influencers of the EU.
  o Potentially including (for example) youth experts in all CSDN meetings, to support their connection with EU policy and practice.
- Invest in the EPLO website and CSDN pages to enhance layout and ensure user-friendliness for all key target groups. This should include seeking external expertise to develop the format and user interface to better showcase reports and materials from CSOs (members and non-members).

- Consider launching appeals, signed by EPLO member organisations and others, addressed to the EU and/or Member States. These could be focused on specific calls to action, possibly around EU budgets for peace and conflict.
- Consider establishing a partnership with a media organisation, such as DW, France 24, or other EU-focused media actors, such as Euractiv. This could be used to share messages and materials developed by EPLO members.
- Consider impactful ways to promote European initiatives to address peace and conflict.
- Consider publication of 2-3 discussion papers per year. These could examine a synthesis of learning across CSDN events, possibly related to overarching themes on civil society consultation, dialogue mechanisms, hybrid event inclusion issues, etc.

Recommendations related to Management and Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning:

• To **improve monitoring to capture incremental change.** Includes monitoring systems and tools to track deliverables, demonstrate incremental changes, and provide evidence of progress in the longer term. Use of such tools could give CSDN a more nuanced understanding of how the network contributes to change, understand more clearly whose voice is being heard, and track any incremental steps towards policy and practice shift within the EU. Some tools include:
- CAFOD's Voice & Accountability[5]: supports groups to evaluate their capacity to conduct advocacy programs and improve their performance. Could be adapted for CSDN.
- Contribution Analysis[6]: an approach for assessing causal questions and inferring causality in real-life program evaluations.
- Introduce reporting requirements for EU officials (specifically for the meeting focal point(s)) to demonstrate how CSDN influences processes they work on.
- Increase the use of outcome-monitoring initiatives to enable better understanding of how CSDN inputs influence policy and practice.
- Identify ways to improve participant survey responses, including for online events.
- POG to review and track progress indicators, and ensure a substantive discussion on project outcomes and progress towards impacts (at least once per year).
- POG to track risks and any mitigation measures applied.

• To use **Management Responses** to document reflections and progress related to evaluation feedback.

• To consider mechanisms to **further outsource administration and logistics support for CSDN events.** This includes continuing outsourcing of flight booking and tech support in hybrid meetings, and considering new outsourcing for participant hotel identification and booking of external (but highly-accessible) meeting venues in Brussels and elsewhere, and/or for providing A/V and tech support during online or hybrid meetings.

• For the **POG to consider allowing additional time and preparation to support a comprehensive approach to engaging EU officials in relevant CSDN events.** And to consider ways of using internal EU knowledge-management systems and mechanisms (whether online or through brownbag lunches etc.) as a way of **reinforcing the value of CSO consultation in relation to policy and practice development.**

• For **CSDN to consider increasing staff capacity and resources in light of recommendations** related to increased preparation, research, website/database improvement, and support ideas for new ways of working, outreach methods, and advocacy/audience strategy development.

---

[5] See here for details: https://efom.crs.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2016/05/Voice-Accountability-Tool-CAFOD-EN.pdf
[6] See here for details: https://www.betterevaluation.org/methods-approaches/approaches/contribution-analysis.

V. Conclusions

A summary of the main findings from this evaluation are grouped in the table below using the OECD/DAC criteria used as the key lines of inquiry for this evaluation.

Relevance & Coherence	• The activities delivered aligned with the project proposal and addressed the need for a mechanism to connect the EU with civil society on issues of conflict and peace. • Knowledge within EPLO and the trust it has built with the EU provides EPLO and the CSDN mechanism a unique ability to meet this need. • The activities delivered aligned with the needs of the EU related to specific policies, guidelines, and review meetings. However, more could be done to broaden the reach of this project to additional EU institutions.
Effectiveness	• The activities delivered proved effective in delivering above the target number of CSDN events (39 to date, compared to a September 2023 target of 46). • The ability of the project to adapt rapidly to Covid-19 complications was noted and praised. • Monitoring initiatives have documented these quantitative results, but there has been limited focus on tracking overall progress towards impact and change, which could have been more effective.
Sustainability & Efficiency	• Engagement with CSDN has enabled many participants (from civil society and across the EU) to broaden their network and connect with others they would not otherwise have had the chance to meet. For some CSO experts and EU officials, these relationships will continue beyond CSDN. • Engagement with CSDN events has deepened participants' knowledge and understanding of conflict and peace issues, particularly allowing them to hear a range of perspectives around local context dynamics. • Participation in CSDN Training Seminars has deepened CSO experts' knowledge and understanding of EU institutions and how they function. • However, more could still be done to broaden reach towards and influence on other EU institutions and a wider range of conflict-based CSOs, and to improve inclusion/diversity, including among young people.
Impact	• Overall, inputs from CSDN events have been used to inform and influence EU policy and practice related to conflict prevention and peacebuilding. Several concrete examples are provided in this report. • Further, several CSOs changed their ways of engaging with the EU, and in some cases CSOs changed their own approaches to CP/PB.

Table 10: Summary of findings organised by OECD/DAC Criteria

Annex I: Scope of Work

The period of time covered by this Agreement is from Monday 20 March 2023 to Friday 26 May 2023 for a maximum of 15 working days during this period.

I.   SCOPE OF WORK.

DESCRIPTION OF DUTIES:

The Contractee shall undertake an evaluation of the Civil Society Dialogue Network IV (CSDN IV) project. The evaluation will be conducted according to the 'Terms of Reference' that are attached to this Service Agreement.

METHOD OF PERFORMANCE:

The Contractee shall be subject to the overall direction of the Contractor, and shall be directly accountable to the EPLO Executive Director, Sonya Reines-Djivanides, or her designee.

The duties described herein are to be performed by the Contractee who may not subcontract to fulfil their responsibilities under this Agreement without prior authorisation from the Contractor.

TIME COMMITMENT OF CONTRACTEE:

The Contractee shall complete the work under this Agreement by Friday 26 May 2023.
This Agreement covers the total amount of 15 working days.

OBLIGATIONS OF CONTRACTEE:

The Contractee undertakes to:
- Interview key stakeholders, including EPLO staff members and civil society and EU policy-maker participants in CSDN events
- Analyse CSDN documents, including official project documents (e.g. contract, budget, interim financial and narrative reports etc.) CSDN event documents (e.g. agendas, background papers, meeting reports, responses to participant surveys etc.) and minutes of Project Oversight Group (POG) meetings
- Draft an evaluation report to be submitted to the Contractor by Friday 12 May 2023
- Incorporate changes to the draft evaluation report based on comments received from the Contractor and submit a final version by Friday 26 May 2023.

The Contractee shall act with discretion, respect and cultural sensitivity at all times.

Annex II: List of Interviewees

Many thanks to the following evaluation participants who provided valuable time, input and feedback to inform this evaluation.

Name	Organisation	Type of organisation
Olivia Cayemaex	Conciliation Resources (EU) / Mediateur	Brussels based CSO
Anonymous	UN Representative	International organisation
Souaré Ansoumane	West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP)	Non-European-based civil society
Kirsten Meersschaert	International Alert	European-based civil society
Sebastian Babaud	Service for Foreign Policy Instruments, EC	EC (though now at EEAS)
Antje Herrberg	European External Action Service, EU	EEAS (though now at EUCAP Sahel Niger)
Giovanni Squadrito	Service for Foreign Policy Instruments, EC	EC
Peter Marsden	Concordis International	European-based civil society
Sébastien Coquoz	European External Action Service, EU	EEAS
Meri Paunonen	EUCAP Sahel Niger	Other EU Institution
Marie-Charlotte Forgeron	CMI – Martti Ahtisaari Peace Foundation	Brussels based CSO
Bojana Mumin	Kvinna til Kvinna	European-based civil society
Jasper Peet-Martel	Conducive Space for Peace	European-based civil society
Sonya Reines-Djivanides	European Peacebuilding Liaison Office	PMT
Ben Moore	European Peacebuilding Liaison Office	PMT
Lorenzo Angelini	European Peacebuilding Liaison Office	PMT
Marie-Lena Groenewald	European Peacebuilding Liaison Office	PMT
Maria Cipriani	European Peacebuilding Liaison Office	PMT
Katja Niemi	European Peacebuilding Liaison Office	PMT
Lorenzo Conti	European Peacebuilding Liaison Office	PMT
Laura Davis	European Peacebuilding Liaison Office	PMT
Els Mortier	Service for Foreign Policy Instruments, EC	EC
Katariina Leinonen	European External Action Service, EU	EEAS

Annex III: Documents Reviewed

The primary documents reviewed for the evaluation included:

- CSDN Phase IV Contract
- CSDN Evaluations from Phases I, II and III
- Interim Financial Reports
- Interim Narrative Reports
- Outcome Monitoring Reports
- POG Minutes
- Documents related to selected CSDN events, which included participant lists, meeting agenda, concept notes, meeting reports, participant feedback.