



Civil Society Dialogue Network Geographic Meeting

20 years of EU engagement in Afghanistan: Gathering civil society perspectives

Tuesday 18 January 2022, Online

MEETING REPORT

This Civil Society Dialogue Network (CSDN) Geographic Meeting (GM) brought together 26 civil society representatives and 10 officials from the European Commission (EC) and the European External Action Service (EEAS). The overall objective of the meeting was for civil society representatives to (1) provide their analysis of the EU's engagement in Afghanistan over the past 20 years with a particular focus on the nature, timeliness and impact of EU support on the situation in the country; and (2) make recommendations that can help to inform future EU engagement in Afghanistan and other conflict-affected countries and regions.

As the meeting was held under the Chatham House Rule, the views expressed in this report may not be attributed to any participating individual or institution nor do they necessarily represent the views of all of the meeting participants, the European Peacebuilding Liaison Office (EPLO) and its member organisations, or the co-organisers.

Civil society representatives raised the following issues and made the following recommendations:

EU support for development and security sector reform (SSR)

- The EU has contributed to many significant advancements and achievements for the development and well-being of the Afghan population since 2001, including in the fields of media, literacy, the rule of law, education, gender equality, access to health, women's political participation, and the promotion of fundamental freedoms. Several participants suggested that these developments and capacities would be essential for years to come, and have strengthened the resilience of the Afghan people in the face of Taliban governance.*
- These development achievements, were, however, undermined by the lack of attention to tackling issues related to corruption. There was also a lack of proper oversight and transparency to monitor the EU and the international community's investments in Afghanistan. The international community's lack of proper monitoring systems for the funds spent in Afghanistan allowed, if not enabled, corruption to grow in the country.
- The international community's military agenda was too short-sighted and stability-oriented, and often failed to prioritise the Afghan population's well-being. While the EU's investments in Afghanistan were primarily civilian, these military engagements and experiments tended to undermine civilian trust and buy-in to other development initiatives, as the lack of oversight and accountability resulted in impunity. Much attention in building the capacity of security forces was

dedicated to hardware and tactical training, and less attention was given to 'softer' but essential capacity building in areas such as human resources and respect for human rights.

- SSR efforts were also focused disproportionately on the military aspects, with insufficient emphasis on the necessary civilian components. In this context, SSR support could have been focused more on the civil-military relationship, such as engaging with civil society and the media, and promoting norms in areas such as human rights, accountability and transparency. SSR efforts were highly politicised, and undermined by lack of coordination, management and oversight.*

Inclusivity and civil society engagement

- Some participants expressed particular praise for the EU's consistency in promoting its principles such as inclusivity, gender equality, and engagement with civil society and rural organisations, whilst also calling for it to act even more on these principles. While it is important for the EU to set norms rhetorically, it is also important for the EU to match its policies with actions. For example, one participant explained that if the EU was to be serious about promoting human rights, it should support actions and movements in the country, and EU representatives should ensure that they take the time to engage with a wide spectrum of civil society. It is also important for the EU to enact these principles even after transition phases.
- Several participants welcomed EU investments in supporting civil society organisations (CSOs) since 2001, and highlighted the importance of consistently and systematically engaging with civil society to meaningfully inform EU engagements. Some participants were particularly complementary of the EU's efforts to engage rural CSOs, as well as the EU's efforts to have a principled and safe approach to engaging with civil society.
- Short-term funding remained a key difficulty for meaningful support to CSOs. The financial precarity that has been induced by short-term support for these organisations has hindered their ability to act with a long-term and strategic vision.
- Despite many efforts to support civil society, several participants suggested that the EU had failed to support inclusivity and gender equality at the political level in the Afghan government. In particular, many ethnic minorities were not allowed to participate in governance, which may have contributed to the rapid takeover of Taliban forces in 2021.*

Political engagements

- Several participants deplored the EU's weak role in steering the Afghan peace negotiations since 2001, including during the Doha talks. They suggested that the EU should have asserted a bigger and more independent political role, rather than simply supporting the United States in its decisions and actions.
- Some participants commented on the poor timing of the engagement of different factions of the population at different times, deploring the exclusion of the Taliban at the beginning of the negotiations, and subsequently the exclusion of the Afghan government towards the end. This alternate exclusion led the parties to harden their positions, which undermined the possibility of identifying 'win-win' solutions and rapprochement. This could have been avoided through better communication to understand the needs and goals of the various parties to the conflict.
- The EU had several political setbacks in its political engagement with the peace negotiations. For example, the EU failed to support and engage Afghan youth in the political arena, which led to a feeling of exclusion among the youth.* In addition, the EU did not always seem to have a united voice in political engagements, which would have helped its credibility. The EU sometimes failed to engage when faced with political impasses such as widespread election fraud.

- The international community, including the EU, applied mainly western models of governance, peacemaking and state transformation throughout their political engagement, and could have tailored their engagement further to Afghan society and cultural traditions.
- Throughout the negotiations, the international community, including the EU, failed to respect key red lines expressed by CSOs, and particularly women's rights activists.

Support to victims and at-risk people

- Some participants suggested that the EU could have done more to protect at-risk factions of the population in the run up to August 2021, including women, ethnic minorities, human rights defenders, lawyers and judges. They called on the EU to further support the physical security of these at-risk populations, including by providing humanitarian support in Afghanistan, but also by facilitating humanitarian corridors out of the country.*
- While humanitarian support is needed, several participants urged the EU to prevent its funds and actions from empowering the Taliban by supporting communities directly.

Recommendations

- The EU should increasingly invest in civilian peacebuilding activities and practices, such as tackling communal divisions and negative peace (e.g. by promoting dialogue, literacy and social cohesion).*
- The EU should continue to support Afghan civic space (e.g. by helping to depoliticise the actions of CSOs, and providing long-term and flexible funding). The EU should also establish clear engagement criteria for civil society, such as an inclusive definition of CSOs that would include relevant traditional structures.*
- The EU should engage in a flexible, reactive, context- and risk-sensitive manner, and consistently and meaningfully engage with civil society actors to inform this engagement. Context sensitivity should include an intersectional approach to context analysis, taking into account religion, gender, society and the economy.*
- The EU should plan rather long-term funding based on strategic priorities identified by and with civil society.
- The EU should invest in strengthening its relationship with the Afghan population and engage with rural communities, rather than focusing solely on the central government in Kabul.*
- The EU should agree on and make all parties respect clear red lines, rather than adopting a mitigation approach. In addition to red lines, the EU should set clear and realistic goals, as well as incremental objectives in order to avoid principle-based circular exchanges.
- The EU should maintain a presence in Afghanistan, particularly to counterbalance the presence of other actors such as China and Russia.*
- In the long term, the EU should support the restarting of peace talks, and take a larger political role in this process with an eye to ensuring their inclusivity.*

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

Civil Society Dialogue Network

The Civil Society Dialogue Network (CSDN) is a mechanism for dialogue between civil society and EU policy-makers on issues related to peace and conflict. It is co-financed by the European Union (Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace). It is managed by the European Peacebuilding Liaison Office (EPLO), a civil society network, in co-operation with the European Commission (EC) and the European External Action Service (EEAS). The fourth phase of the CSDN will last from 2020 to 2023. For more information, please visit the [EPLO website](#).