



## Civil Society Dialogue Network Geographic Meeting

# Towards Peace: Delivering Public Services and Responsive Governance in the Sahel

19 May 2022

## MEETING REPORT

The overall objective of the online meeting was to gather civil society recommendations on how the European Union should contribute to peace and stabilisation in the Sahel. In particular, the discussions focused on how the EU should support responsive, inclusive and transparent governance; improved delivery of public services by state authorities, including in relation to articulating civilian and military/security efforts; and building trust between state authorities and populations. The meeting was organised to inform the ongoing revision of the [Roadmap](#) of the Coalition for the Sahel, in particular its third pillar relating to providing 'support for the return of the state and administrations in the territory' through a civilian and political surge.

The discussions touched on the changing peace and conflict dynamics at the regional, national and local levels, and on their effects on political situations and on peoples' lives. Participants provided contextual analysis about the expanding threat of non-state armed groups and what this means for different communities. They also discussed root causes of conflict in the Sahel, including failures of governance and justice, systemic discrimination, and violence perpetrated by national security forces. They reflected on the EU's partnership with national governments in the region, ongoing transitional processes and the impact of military coups.

This report does not capture the level of detail of the discussions, but it presents a summary of the key points and recommendations put forward by the civil society participants, particularly with regard to how the European Union should enhance how it addresses these priority areas in its policies, programming and interventions.

The meeting brought together 47 participants, including 21 civil society experts and 26 officials from the European External Action Service (EEAS) and the European Commission (EC).

The discussions were held under the Chatham House Rule. There was no attempt to reach a consensus during the meeting or through this report.

### The 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](#).

## Key points and recommendations

**1. The European Union (EU) should develop further its instruments to ensure that its policies, programming and interventions in the Sahel are conflict-sensitive and based on robust conflict analysis, and that they are able to respond to rapid changes. This should include:**

- Ensuring that its actions seeking to address peace and conflict dynamics (including its support to national security forces) are informed by meaningful consultations with civil society and populations, especially diverse women and young people, and other marginalised and vulnerable groups. This is necessary to capture differences across countries, areas and communities, including with respect to (formal and informal) institutions and power structures, social dynamics, patterns of exclusion, and root causes and drivers of conflict. This should be done at the local and national levels and through regional forums, and particularly as part of EU conflict analysis processes.
- Examining in conflict analysis where state authorities are and are not present, what public services they aim to deliver, and to whom, as well as what the needs of diverse population groups are.
- Developing and strengthening EU mechanisms to receive feedback from civil society and broader populations about its actions and the EU-supported actions of state authorities. This is necessary to ensure effectiveness and to avoid doing harm.
- Ensuring that it adequately addresses transboundary dynamics (e.g. between Burkina Faso and Mali) in regional and bilateral policies and programming. Developments in border areas are important not only from a security perspective, but also in how they affect transboundary mobility, which can be essential to the livelihoods and identities of border and cross-border communities.
- Enhancing the EU's coordination with other international actors and with national governments, especially to ensure the coherence of actions.
- Recognising that three of the Sahelian countries are going through political transitions with concrete implications for peace and conflict dynamics, democracy, rule of law and an open civic space. The EU should develop profound analysis about the relationships between international action and national political developments, and reflect on how to minimise risks that military officials from the national security forces of partner countries who are trained by – or in – the EU commit coups d'état.

**2. The EU should support relationships between states and their populations that are based on the fair, effective and equitable delivery of public services and on protection – not on repression and violence. In particular, the EU should further support the role of local authorities in delivering public services and developing infrastructure. This should include:**

- Strengthening the ability and capacities of state institutions to deliver public services throughout their territories to the benefit of populations in a fair and equitable manner, notably by helping state institutions to 'return' to areas where they are currently unable to deliver services. This should be done, inter alia, through technical expertise and by promoting adequate dialogue and consultations with civil society and diverse members of the population, including diverse women and young people, and other marginalised and vulnerable groups. This is necessary to ensure that authorities have an accurate picture of the needs of all social groups, and that they commit to responding to these needs in a non-discriminatory manner and not only to those of the most dominant groups.

In particular, the EU should work with, and support, local authorities, including mayors, local elected officials and regional councils, who often remain at the side of populations even during crises, and who are familiar with local realities and the needs of populations.

- Placing particular emphasis on understanding, promoting and supporting people's access to justice, making sure that justice institutions are effective and non-discriminatory. When people have limited access to official judicial institutions, they tend to rely on justice delivered by traditional, customary and/or religious authorities or by armed groups. However, official judicial institutions are often seen as

preferable when they deliver justice adequately, particularly by women and marginalised groups (traditional/customary justice institutions are usually dominated by, and favour, men).

- Avoiding situations where state institutions are replaced in delivering services by the EU or by other actors (e.g. international organisations).
- Promoting the importance of ensuring that infrastructure projects are pursued based on the needs and input of local populations, and that they benefit communities equitably.
- Promoting the roles of local extension workers and of extension services in general, including with respect to how they can help local communities ensure the sustainability of their livelihoods (e.g. training small business owners to maintain water points, training youth and social enterprises on adapting to the effects of climate change, etc.).

**3. The EU should continue to help strengthen governance structures at national and local levels. In its support, the EU should prioritise inclusivity and responsiveness to all people's needs, and contribute to building trust between authorities and different population groups. This should include:**

- Helping to address the root causes of mistrust between communities and state authorities, including unequal access to (and distribution of) public services (including access to justice), exclusion from governance structures, predatory and discriminatory state behaviour, physical and economic insecurity, etc.
- Helping to make state institutions more inclusive, participatory, and responsive to people's needs, including but not limited to their security needs. For example, the EU should support the reform of legal frameworks relating to states of emergency, the degree of centralisation, the use of violence by national security forces, the recognition and protection of human rights, access to land and natural resources, and the defence of gender equality. It should also promote and support people's access to legal and administrative documents, including digitally.
- Promoting democratic processes and of the rule of law, and defending a more open civic space in its political dialogue with partner governments.
- Promoting decentralisation where relevant, and adequate connection and two-way communication between local and national governance structures. The EU should also promote ensuring that sub-national authorities have the capacities, resources and autonomy to address people's needs and to support the initiatives for peace of civil society.
- Working with media, including local media, to help educate people about their rights, and to help connect and build trust between populations and authorities.
- Supporting local initiatives similar to consultative security committees ('comités consultatifs de sécurité', CCS) in Mali, which have had a positive impact in helping local authorities and civil society actors (including, when relevant, actors from local surveillance committees) sit together and reflect on challenges and how to address them. These committees can help identify needs, concerns and possible responses relating to a range of security issues without having to go through processes at the national level. They can also help connect local initiatives and national frameworks.

**4. The EU should expand its support to peacebuilding and conflict prevention, particularly dialogue and mediation efforts and mechanisms at the local, national and regional levels. This support needs to be long-term and to involve a focus on cross-border dynamics. This should include:**

- Helping to map and supporting existing mechanisms for conflict prevention, management and resolution, particularly those for dialogue and mediation. The EU should help ensure that these mechanisms are inclusive and efficient, and help avoid duplication, including by coordinating with other international actors. It should also support national state institutions that can help coordinate, connect and/or provide support to such mechanisms.
- Supporting the development and funding the implementation of national strategies for social cohesion (see the example of the 'stratégie nationale de la cohésion sociale' in Burkina Faso), which should include stipulations to ensure that their implementation is funded, monitored and that the strategies

are updated regularly. The EU should also promote the regular organisation of national forums with civil society to discuss the implementation of the strategies.

- Supporting dialogue between authorities, armed groups and civil society to facilitate humanitarian access, prevent further violence, help protect civilians, and find sustainable solutions to conflict.
- Increasing significantly its financial and technical support to actors pursuing dialogue and mediation initiatives at the local, national and regional levels, identifying the appropriate type of support that actors need (e.g. mediators may require financial support over technical expertise).
- Supporting community-based approaches to dialogue and mediation. This should involve providing support to civil society actors to expand and to institutionalise existing initiatives, including those relating to local, intercommunity dialogue committees for the peaceful resolution of conflict (over access to land, to natural resources, etc.), and to the establishment of monitoring committees ('comités de suivi') to ensure that agreements are implemented and sustainable.

In particular, the EU should support and help monitor local peace agreements, which can be threatened by third parties (particularly non-state armed groups). It should support the meaningful participation of diverse actors from local communities in these agreements, as agreements should not be imposed on local communities from above (including by national actors who may be perceived as favouring certain communities over others). This is necessary to contribute to the sustainability of agreements, and to ensure that they adequately address local needs, that they are not disconnected from local realities, and that they do not have counter-productive effects for the safety of communities (e.g. agreements that fail to address how a third party contributes to violent conflict in the area may lead the communities who were made to sign the agreement to be targeted by the armed group).

- Supporting the inclusivity of local mechanisms for dialogue, mediation and conflict resolution. The EU should also support that their outcomes address dynamics of exclusion and marginalisation, to avoid reinforcing the exclusion of certain groups (e.g. women, young people and marginalised groups).
- Supporting disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) processes, helping in particular with the reintegration of former combatants and their families in communities. The EU should support the creation of local dialogue committees to address this and to help engage children and young women and men who have taken up arms (in Burkina Faso, such local initiatives have yielded positive results). These initiatives should be accompanied by EU support to the delivery of public services by state institutions, so as to avoid people returning to armed groups.
- Approaching violent extremism through preventive lenses in particular, addressing the aforementioned root causes of conflict that lead young people to joining armed groups. It is also useful to work with community leaders, including religious leaders, and to support the empowerment of women (this can reduce the likelihood of their sons and daughters joining armed groups).
- Supporting the establishment of transboundary commissions to help respond to some of the risks or tensions relating to the movement of communities across borders (e.g. the movement of herder communities for transhumance), and to facilitate the delivery of public services to communities that move across borders.
- Helping strengthen the implementation of the Women, Peace and Security agenda, including by supporting the implementation of National Action Plans by partner governments.
- Helping state authorities and civil society actors coordinate actions across the humanitarian-development-peace nexus.

**5. The EU should enhance its support to national security forces ('forces de défense et de sécurité') in a way that strengthens their ability to protect and to address threats to the safety of populations, that ensures their compliance with human rights standards and international humanitarian law (IHL), and that helps build trust between communities and security forces. This should include:**

- Ensuring that its security interventions are part of broader political strategies (which also include a range of civilian means) that aim at addressing the root causes and consequences of conflict, and at contributing to the human security of populations.

- Promoting the importance of ensuring that state-centric security and stability is not prioritised over the delivery by state authorities of public services and infrastructure to populations, and the protection of civilians.
- Strengthening the monitoring of the EU's support to national security forces, including of their EU-supported actions.
- Supporting the roles that civil society actors may play in fostering dialogue between national security forces and populations, and in monitoring the actions of national security forces. The EU should pay particular attention to understanding why certain communities may trust armed groups more than national security forces (e.g. because the latter may be absent or may have perpetrated violence against communities), and it should adapt (or cease) its support to national security forces accordingly.
- Encouraging national security forces to maintain a presence in areas where they have intervened against armed groups to ensure the safety of populations and to ensure that these interventions are associated with maintaining or re-instating a state presence, including for the delivery of public services. When security forces leave areas after interventions, armed groups often return, and they will frequently commit violence against local populations in retaliation. National security forces should also engage with local communities to facilitate the return of state representatives.

In Mali, the *Pôles Sécurisés de Développement et de Gouvernance* (PSDG) have been successful in helping improve security situations and in providing an enabling environment for the resumption of the delivery of public services and for the development of economic activity. However, their geographic scope remains limited.

- Supporting the capacities of national security forces to deliver basic services for a limited time in circumstances when state authorities are unable to do so, to serve as a transition toward enabling state authorities to resume the delivery of public services. This may include providing medical services, (re)building basic infrastructure, etc. The EU should also encourage national security forces to engage in social activities with communities, to develop trust with them.
- Helping national authorities and security forces dismantle self-defence groups and regain the monopoly of violence, without creating a security vacuum. In doing so, the EU should promote the importance of protecting the safety of local populations indiscriminately, including that of the communities that self-defence groups were protecting.
- Measuring the effectiveness of its security interventions and of its support to national security forces through indicators relating to people's perceptions of their security and to positive outcomes (i.e. villages saved, the re-established delivery of public services, etc.), and not to how many leaders of armed groups have been killed (as this does not necessarily help protect populations).

**6. The EU should place the protection of civilians at the heart of all of its support to national security forces. This should include:**

- Ensuring that its security interventions and the interventions of the national security forces it supports do not cause harm to civilians, either directly (with civilians targeted or harmed as collateral damage) or indirectly (armed groups targeting civilians as retaliation after an intervention). The EU and national security forces should work with local leaders and civil society to prevent this, including by supporting mechanisms and national strategies for dialogue between national security forces and populations on the protection of civilians.
- Providing operational training to national security forces on the protection of civilians and expanding trainings on human rights and IHL, including trainings on gender issues (notably on gender-based violence in conflict and how to respond to it), making sure that the national security forces the EU supports develop their ability to distinguish civilians from combatant and comply with human rights standards and IHL.
- Supporting transparent accountability mechanisms, through the justice system, for perpetrators of violence against civilians, including from within national security forces.

- Supporting mechanisms to protect civilians who cooperate with national security forces, so that they are not targeted by armed groups because of their cooperation. At the same time, the EU should raise awareness about the need to avoid the instrumentalisation/putting at risk of populations by national security forces to receive intelligence.
- Providing financial, material and technical support to civil society organisations to develop their capacity to monitor the actions of national security forces, including violence against civilians, and defending this role for civil society in its political dialogue with partner governments.
- Helping raise awareness among national security forces about the need to rigorously verify 'intelligence' gathered from civilians before acting on it, as it may be mistaken and/or malicious and lead to an escalation of violence.
- Supporting the development of processes and capacities among national security forces to protect human rights defenders in particular, including from abusive state actors.
- Supporting early warning systems to integrate and monitor human rights violations. More and better monitoring, documenting and communicating of these violations is needed to address existing violations and to prevent recurrence.
- Promoting the importance of protecting not only the lives of civilians but also their livelihoods. For example, armed groups often destroy or threaten to destroy crops and stocks, and they can prevent local trade fairs and markets from being held. The EU should also support efforts to compensate civilians who have been harmed by armed actors.
- Promoting the importance of protecting infrastructure, including roads and communication infrastructure (e.g. telephone and internet lines) as part of efforts to protect civilians, as it can allow communities to communicate and/or flee if they are being attacked as well as provide vital connections to markets, health facilities, schools, etc.

**7. The EU should hold partner governments accountable to their commitments, strengthen its monitoring of how its financial and material support is used, and help partner governments enact legal reforms and address corruption. This should include:**

- Ensuring that it holds governments accountable when they are not delivering public services fairly, whether they are democratically-elected or not. The EU should continue to use and develop further concrete indicators relating to the delivery of public services, in order to monitor and evaluate how populations benefit from services, and to detect and help address gaps and failures more effectively.  
In particular, the EU should take greater steps to ensure that its financial support does not contribute to mismanagement and corruption, including by ensuring that accountability and transparency mechanisms are in place with respect to how its support is used at the national level. This should include ensuring that relevant public documents are easily accessible by populations.
- Finding ways to stay engaged appropriately in countries where the political and security situation is degrading, in order to help protect civilians and address their needs, whilst continuing to hold governments accountable. If the EU pulls out, this can create a vacuum that other actors will seek to fill (e.g. armed groups), with possible negative consequences for populations.

**8. The EU should increase and strengthen its support to civil society actors, particularly local civil society actors, and the roles that they can play in preventing conflict and building peace, including through financial, diplomatic, material and technical support. This should include:**

- Prioritising the provision of support to local civil society actors, including informal and grassroots organisations. This should be done with particular attention to supporting youth and women's organisations. The EU should recognise and address the fact that its funding modalities may inadvertently discriminate against such organisations (e.g. due to bureaucratic constraints and selection criteria that can be difficult to meet for small, informal organisations).
- Supporting the peacebuilding and conflict prevention roles of traditional and religious leaders, whilst ensuring that women, young people and other marginalised groups are included as part of these efforts.

- Defending, in the EU's political dialogue with partner governments, the ability for civil society organisations (particularly humanitarian organisations) to access communities throughout their territories and to engage with all conflict actors, including non-state armed groups.
- Recognising that anti-Western sentiment has increased in certain parts of the Sahel, and that certain political leaders are using this to limit the space for civil society organisations that benefit from European funding. The EU should reflect on how to provide support to civil society organisations without negative impact.
- Supporting the capacity of civil society organisations to monitor state authorities and their actions, including with regard to how they spend funds provided by the EU.

**9. The EU should enhance how it communicates about its efforts to address conflict dynamics in the region. This should include:**

- Engaging to a greater extent with populations, including communicating better to them (a) how it is taking their concerns into account in its actions, (b) where its support is going, and which actions are happening as a result of its support, and (c) the difference between what it is doing and what individual EU Member States are doing.
- Avoiding the creation of expectations that it cannot meet. The EU should express that it is engaging in the region to help partner governments and populations address the challenges they are facing, and not that it will solve the challenges itself. It should also communicate that it recognises how multi-faceted and complex the crisis in the Sahel is.
- Strengthening how it addresses mis/disinformation about its actions, particularly on social media.