Civil Society Dialogue Policy Meeting

Enhancing EU Stabilisation Practice

Thursday 16 February, Brussels, Belgium

Meeting Report

The objective of this meeting was to engage in an exchange on how to strengthen EU stabilisation practice, learning from best practices and lessons learnt by civil society experts. As part of the EU's ongoing efforts to enhance its stabilisation practice globally, this meeting brought together EU officials and civil society experts to discuss what is needed for the EU to support the transition from political and humanitarian crises towards a development agenda, helping to transform the conflict and enabling more robust peace processes.

The meeting brought together 40 participants, including 23 civil society experts from different parts of the world, 10 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, which represents the key points and recommendations put forward by the civil society participants. They may not be attributed to any participating individual or organisation, nor do they necessarily represent the views of all the meeting participants, the European Peacebuilding Liaison Office (EPLO) and its member organisations, or the EU institutions

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Key Recommendations

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- ❖ *Effective implementation of 'stabilisation' activities requires for the EU to be clear and transparent about its goals. The EU institutions and Member States' goals should be aligned.*
- ❖ *The EU should continuously partner, engage and communicate with a diversity of civil society actors in an inclusive manner. Engagement should not put these actors at risk.*
- ❖ *Investing in regular conflict analysis and understanding the diversity of actors is a vital for effective implementation. Conflict analysis should be sensitive to gender, intersecting forms of discrimination, and climate.*
- ❖ *The EU should ensure that its stabilisation practice fosters adaptiveness, learning and accountability.*
- ❖ *The EU stabilisation practice should be human centred (and not state centred) for ensuring human security.*
- ❖ *'Legitimacy' of any given actor in a complex conflict context should be well understood.*
- ❖ *The EU funding in stabilisation contexts needs to be conflict sensitive and follow the "do no harm" principle.*

The following key points and recommendations emerged from the discussions.

Effective implementation

❖ *Effective implementation of 'stabilisation' activities requires for the EU to be clear and transparent about its goals. The EU institutions and Member States' (EU MS) goals should be aligned.*
❖ *The EU should continuously partner, engage and communicate with a diversity of civil society actors in an inclusive manner. Engagement should not put these actors at risk.*
❖ *Investing in regular conflict analysis and understanding the diversity of actors is a vital for effective implementation. Conflict analysis should be sensitive to gender, intersecting forms of discrimination, and climate.*
❖ *The EU should ensure that its stabilisation practice fosters adaptiveness, learning and accountability.*

The EU should be clear about what the term 'stabilisation' entails with **clarity about the objectives and expected outcomes** of its stabilisation efforts in any given context. The EU should also be clear about the scope of its intervention thereby leaving space for other actors to intervene in their areas of expertise. Conflicts are non-linear and often cyclical processes that require sustained efforts in peacebuilding; in its approach, the EU should avoid inadvertently creating a dichotomy between peacebuilding and stabilisation. Working in phases risks imposing political red lines and impeding progress, and in countries with cycles of violence, it is hard to determine when stabilisation starts and ends. There is a perception that sometimes the EU is hesitant or avoiding to use its political capital in fragile and conflict affected contexts that would be required for longer-term change.

In order to avoid undermining collective efforts, goals of the **EU MS and institutions should be aligned and contributing to the EU integrated approach.**[1] The EU should mitigate the risk of politicisation and delays of stabilisation actions that can be further aggravated due to tensions between EU MS. Furthermore, several EU MS have a colonial past and the negative perceptions towards them can be projected on to the EU. For many countries, this undermines the EU as a strategic partner in terms of building solutions.
➤ To mitigate some of the negative perceptions and risks related to those, the EU should invest in diversity of its staff seconded to third countries and find ways to diversify its external action.

The EU should prioritize engagement with diverse local partners[2] throughout its programming. **Involvement of civil society in the planning process and enabling them to shape action in conflict sensitive ways is important in transforming conflicts and increasing local ownership.** Civil society organisations (CSOs) are often viewed as the ultimate implementing partner, but they are often left out of the design phase. In some contexts, the lack of trust between the EU and local CSOs is an obstacle for collaboration[3].
➤ In order to anchor stabilisation efforts into conflict dynamics and the realities in the communities, **the EU's outreach should be extended to smaller cities, suburbs and rural and remote areas**. However, due to security concerns or lack of resources, movement of EU officials' based in conflict affected contexts may be restricted to capital cities and other areas deemed safe. This should be managed by other solutions, including digital ones in order to achieve a fuller understanding of the conflict.

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[1] There are different definitions of 'stabilisation' among the EU MS. The EU MS second national experts to various contexts, which has a risk of leading to incoherence in action if the definitions differ.
[2] Including e.g. traditional and religious leaders; human rights defenders; urban and rural actors; women and youth.
[3] Participant mentioned Mali as a case in point.

➢ In the context of high volatility, there are often emerging civil society actors within more informal structures/emerging acts of civicness[4], but the knowledge of these actors gets lost if it is not systematically mapped and managed. Keeping up the practice of creating roadmaps to work with civil society can be one way of ensuring meaningful engagement and ensuring regular consultations in countries where the EU engages in stabilisation[5].

➢ Sometimes there are pre-existing assumptions about who the key stakeholders to engage with are. Rather than reinforcing historical analysis, the EU should make a conscious effort of engaging the individuals, networks and associations that are actually playing a role in transforming conflicts. The EU should not rely on engaging with actors nominated by the government only, as sometimes authoritarian governments attempt to manipulate non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that the EU works with.

➢ The EU should be available to advise and guide civil society actors in conflict contexts on how to use the different instruments/tools at their disposal.[6] The prevailing feeling is that civil society actors often do not understand the EU tools available for use or how to form coalitions that are relevant.

High visibility of the EU's work with civil society actors can put these actors at risk, and the EU should mitigate such risks e.g. by finding alternative ways of engagement that entail limited or no visibility. Local partners may not be able to publish certain information due to security concerns, and have to find ways to work around local sensitivities. International non-governmental organisations (INGOs) can provide visibility to the local partners' messages without compromising their security.

Effective implementation is based on robust conflict analysis that is climate and gender sensitive. In rapidly changing contexts, conflict analysis requires gathering good data from the society and aggregating complex information, including understanding the different levels (local, national, external, regional, international) of a conflict and looking beyond direct conflict actors[7]. **Conflict analysis should be considered as a constant and organic process** and it should not be overly formal and structured. It should be borne in mind that **conflict analysis is not a neutral process, but inherently a political one**: Depending on who conducts it and who are consulted, it achieves different results. The benefit of the analysis does not necessarily lay in the knowledge acquired, but in bringing people together and building relationships and trust between stakeholders in the framework of peacebuilding.

➢ Conflict analysis should be sensitive to gender and how gender dynamics may be transformed. Gender must be understood as more than just a women's issue and consider different types of masculinities, too. Conflict sensitivity requires an understanding of how gender interacts with other forms of discrimination, such as age, ethnicity, socio-economic status, religion, geographic location, etc.

➢ The conflict analysis needs to also take into consideration and map environmental and climate related risks so that the action does not aggravate any climate related risks and environmental degradation.

➢ In order to conduct robust conflict analysis, the EU should have the **sufficient human and other resources for it and make efforts to overcome limitations of mobility[8]** needed for robust analysis in any given conflict context. The EU should better manage

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[4] Participant mentioned Syria as a case in point.
[5] Participant mentioned Chad as a case in point.
[6] E.g. when it is the time to approach different EU actors and which financing instruments are available.
[7] If certain groups or populations are ignored in humanitarian response, for example, this can become a source of tension and instability.
[8] Due to security concerns or lack of resources, movement of EU officials based in conflict affected contexts may be restricted to capital cities and other areas deemed safe.

the loss of knowledge, expertise and learning due to staff turnover in the institutions, EU delegations and CSDP missions.

Use of digital tools can enhance the development of accountability frameworks because **digital spaces can create safer spaces**. Digital spaces can have the potential to connect civil society actors across politically dividing lines and enforce empathy.

➢ When using digital tools, the EU should ensure their accessibility, mitigate the risks of creation of digital bubbles that create divisions and **safeguard the security of people participating in digital spaces**. Online digital platforms for civil society to engage with each other has the potential to open channels of dialogue.
➢ Any promising digital initiatives should be identified and scaled up.

Stabilisation approach

❖ *The EU stabilisation practice should be human centred (and not state centred) for ensuring human security.*
❖ *'Legitimacy' of any given actor in a complex conflict context should be well understood*

Past failures have shown that stability cannot be reached if actions risk reinforcing abusive corrupt and exclusive elites[9] and the EU must be aware of its weight in legitimising actors while engaging with them. **Actors' legitimacy can change during and after a conflict**, and requires careful assessment. The EU is not always unified in terms of identifying the politically legitimate actors and processes, which can lead to lost opportunities of transforming conflicts. Gender should be part of the legitimacy conversation, as often women are excluded from the conversation and overlooked as legitimate actors.

In contexts of limited statehood, it is essential to understand the role of non-state actors, *de facto* authorities, power-holders and decision-makers. The EU should elaborate its stabilisation practice in areas of contested statehood and rethink how it can engage with the *de facto* authorities that take up state functions. The EU should also address the challenges in engaging with armed groups and find ways to ease that process by including their perspectives and priorities in the stabilisation process.

The needs and priorities of communities and protection of civilians should be at the core of the EU's stabilisation efforts. The partnership between the EU and civil society should be defined by dialogue, collaboration, and active and humble listening to people's needs. There should be a balance between supporting state actors and holding them accountable.[10] The EU should foster the state-society social contract to lay a foundation for more responsive and accountable governance.

➢ Mutual accountability and leading by example are the key to successful stabilisation efforts which includes stringent safeguards as well as follow-up on incidents of abuse.
➢ The notion of accountability in justice should be addressed as a key component of stabilisation, and possibly refer specifically to transitional justice.
➢ There should be clear indicators for when the elements of an initiative / intervention are considered dangerous. Data should be collected from bottom up and action adapted based on such data. Contexts can change rapidly especially after agreements are signed[11].

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[9] Participant mentioned Afghanistan as a case in point.
[10] Participant mentioned a project where there was no follow up that conditions for return were satisfied by the government, and the populations returning to the area were put at renewed risk.
[11] Participant mentioned Sudan and the Juba Agreement as a case in point.

The population itself should be perceived as a stabilising actor, not as a passive beneficiary.[12] Protection can also be provided by civil society actors, not just by security forces. Sometimes states themselves are the source of insecurity, and unarmed civilian protection is necessary. Bringing CSOs and communities together with state security and defence forces in a way that does not create security threats to civilians holds the potential to significantly change the dynamics between civil society and security forces, foster mutual understanding and respect for human rights.

The EU should ensure that its communication helps building relationships and fosters exchanges with civil society. Language used should be understandable and plain and void of jargon. Using local ways of communication can be more efficient than using press, media and official channels.

Funding

❖ *The EU funding in stabilisation contexts needs to be conflict sensitive and follow the "do no harm" principle*

Mass funding leads to top-down mass planning, where granularity of robust conflict analysis is lost and action is not adapted swiftly enough. The EU should make an effort to **channel direct funding at community levels and to small local CSOs** that might be best positioned to act as agents of change and create an impact. The administrative and reporting requirements to small CSOs need to be adjusted to realistically reflect their capacities. For sustainable change, local CSOs should be able to gain independence from INGOs in the long-term. The EU could include certain conditions in their contracts with local NGOs and INGOs such as the sharing of management costs and including local NGOs in programme design.

Peacebuilding and conflict prevention including nexus work can involve a lot of trial and error and the **EU funding instruments should reflect that much of the work is experimental** and that it may take a long time to bear fruit. The EU should experiment in small steps with new promising approaches and then integrate the lessons and scale them up. The humanitarian-stabilisation-development nexus field should be considered a "sliding scale", moving at different speeds at different times. Such flexibility can create opportunities for peace. For example, engaging in post-disaster and post-conflict efforts at the same time can be fruitful for stabilisation goals.

Funding can create harmful competition between civil society organisations. To reduce competition and encourage collaboration for improved effectiveness, **the EU should make an effort to move from sectoral funding towards area based planning** based on communities' needs. Area-based planning has the potential to create alliances between CSOs that work in the same area and bridge conflict divides.

Funding should be sustainable for initiatives that are demonstrably adaptable and aim to build trust between various actors[13]. There's a concern that the EU instruments are not fully matched to this although the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument - Global Europe (NDICI-GE) demonstrates that there is a drive/willingness by the EU to match its external instruments better. The EU could have a sincere, sustainable dialogue with civil society actors to create flexible funding instruments.

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[12] Participant mentioned Western Niger as an example, where stabilisation process involved social cohesion work and cooperation between civilian and security forces.
[13] Participant mentioned the National Platform for Dialogue in Ukraine as a case in point.

Bureaucracy related to funding can be an impediment to swift action and trust building. It can take months to sign a contract followed by lengthy processes needed to start operations and building relationships with peace actors on the ground. This should be mitigated in contracts for any stabilisation related activities implemented by CSOs.