



# The Perception of the EU in Somalia

## Gathering Civil Society Perspectives

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Country Briefing Paper  
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The objective in writing this Civil Society Dialogue Network (CSDN) Country Briefing Paper was to gather a snapshot of civil society perspectives on the perception of the EU in Somalia and recommendations for the EU's engagement in the country.

This Briefing Paper is the outcome of a conference call held on 13 June 2024 with 20 civil society participants, including international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) and local civil society organisations (CSOs). Guiding questions were circulated to participants in advance of the call. Two additional INGOs provided written input following the call and their contributions were integrated into the Briefing Paper.

The conference call was held under the Chatham House Rule. There was no attempt to reach a consensus in this Briefing Paper; it contains a general overview of participants' contributions, even where they disagreed. The key points and recommendations which are included in this Briefing Paper may not be attributed to any participating individual or organisation, nor do they necessarily represent the views of all the participants or the European Peacebuilding Liaison Office (EPLO)

### 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 (Neighbourhood Development and International Cooperation Instrument – Global Europe). It is managed by the European Peacebuilding Liaison Office (EPLO), a civil society network, in cooperation with the European Commission (EC) and the European External Action Service (EEAS). The fifth phase of the CSDN will last from 2023 to 2026. For more information, please visit the EPLO website.



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## General assessment of conflict dynamics in Somalia

Conflict dynamics in Somalia are **complex and multi-faceted**; different drivers of conflict produce different types of violence, varying geographically and intersecting with other issues, including **climate-driven displacement**.

It was noted in particular that the number of people in Somalia internally displaced due to **environmental factors**, including floods and droughts, **vastly exceeds those displaced by conflict**. Communities frequently find themselves hit by repeated rounds of environmental catastrophe without relief, which drives people to leave.

There are significant differences in conflict dynamics between **urban and rural areas**. In urban areas, the chief concern is the al-Shabaab insurgency and the effects of mass internal displacement from other areas of the country. In rural areas, the power dynamics of local clan structures and **clan-based conflict** are comparatively larger issues, though in contested areas the issue of al-Shabaab is very much present. In recent months, clan-based violence has flared up in **Galmudug state**; government officials and local politicians have attempted to mediate, but there has been comparatively little involvement from CSOs.

Distrust of government, poor perception of institutions, lack of reconciliation, and people's basic needs not being met are understood to be the **main systemic drivers of conflict**. Investments by and assistance from outside actors which strengthen security infrastructure or build public institutions are important; however, participants underscored that it is vital to ensure those security structures and institutions enjoy the trust of the public, and that the population's material needs are being consistently met. In many cases, local communities take it upon themselves to fight insurgents and/or create their own social services and political structures in places where there is little government presence. After active fighting ends in such areas, it is vital to engage those communities on their own terms to build trust. There must be a "**peace dividend**" for these communities and the public at large, to demonstrate that putting aside their grievances and engaging with the state will bring them immediate, tangible benefits. Such grievances are key drivers of recruitment for al-Shabaab and other armed groups. Failure to address these can lead to the re-emergence of conflict, as groups which united to fight al-Shabaab later turn against each other.

Somalia is not viewed as politically or economically "self-sustaining" – it remains dependent on material and political aid from outside actors. The country has potential, but it will be necessary to **build systems of accountability and to fight corruption**. There must also be better coordination among different levels of government; ministries do not communicate or align their work well currently, and coordination between state and federal authorities is poor. Additionally, many government structures and institutions are repeatedly abolished and re-established, preventing the build-up of necessary institutional memory and expertise.

Finally, concern was expressed about the withdrawal of the African Union Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS), which is due to be completed by the end of 2024. The Somali state alone may be unable to guarantee security after the departure of ATMIS, to which the EU is the largest direct

financial contributor. One participant feared that, in this eventuality, parts of Somalia may be “lost” to conflict.

## Perception of EU engagement in Somalia

The overall perception of the EU by Somali civil society is not very positive.

Several participants expressed the view that international actors, including the EU, appear to have **no broad or systemic approach** to tackling the structural causes of conflict in the country. The current EU approach was described several times as “**fragmented**”. The complexity of the political and security situation in Somalia is such that the work of various international actors (including EU institutions and agencies) is often siloed. Each project takes place in a kind of “bubble”; positive results are generated within a narrow radius but fail to extend outside of it, and these disparate political, security, and development initiatives often **remain disconnected from each other**. Participants expressed hope that the arrival of the new European Commission and the end of the current mandate of the European Union Training Mission (EUTM) in Somalia (at the end of 2024) may represent a chance for a reappraisal of this approach.

Current EU and EU-funded activities are **disproportionately focused on Mogadishu**, and to a lesser extent the capitals of the federal states.

The Somalia–EU Joint Operational Roadmap, which was launched in May 2023 and is intended to last for two years, remains relevant in the eyes of CSOs. However, it is primarily **focused on issues of governance and state-building**: the Somali constitution, constitutional court, and parliament; elections; and interactions between federal and state governments. Other issues are comparatively under-emphasised, and there are “question marks” as to whether this document is **excessively influenced by Brussels’ priorities** rather than those of Somalia. The roadmap was also criticised for focusing on engagement with the government in Mogadishu but not on the **structural drivers of conflict and instability**. As an example, the roadmap sets completion of the provisional constitution as a goal but does not specify a manner or method for its completion. A participant said that this had given the government latitude to pursue the constitution-writing process in an exclusionary manner, **worsening rather than improving trust in the state** and political inclusion.

There is extensive EU effort and funding going to security and migration-related initiatives, but the bloc **could be doing more in areas such as peacebuilding and human rights**. One example given was to better incorporate human rights sensitivity into EU-supported Somali police and military training, to create a culture where abuse, violence against civilians, corruption and extortion are seen as unacceptable.

EU-supported projects at various levels are perceived as **insufficiently accountable** to the Somali people. Government institutions are thought to want **more autonomy from international partners**, including the EU, but find it difficult to assert that. On a local level, there is a general sense that many initiatives **do not seek enough input** from or give a sense of ownership to the communities in which they operate; support and facilitation from international partners is of course vital, but the Somali people must be in the driver’s seat.

The EU's engagement with Somalia is perceived by civil society as having **become less positive** over time. Europe was previously a major actor on issues of peacebuilding and human rights in the country, but now engages with local civil society merely **as a “box-ticking” exercise**. Local CSOs feel that European institutions treat Somalia “just as a project-base” and that this approach limits the EU's impact and influence in the country. One participant observed that at the same time as CSOs are coming to view EU partnership less positively, Europe's relations with the Somali government have improved; they wondered if these two effects were due to a change in relative priorities.

EU-supported Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (**PCVE**) **projects were considered to be effective** and beneficial, especially where they have brought together both local and government stakeholders. However, a participant was unhappy to note that the EU is discontinuing PCVE-type programmes, and instead focusing its efforts on the theme of “stabilisation”.

## Recommendations for the EU

Overall, a need was consistently expressed for the EU to have a more coherent **long-term plan** for engagement in Somalia. The current, fragmented approach should be reformed and there should be a road-map for working on large, interconnected, structural issues going forward. The EU should ensure that all engagement with Somali state structures include mechanisms for **accountability and measurement of success**. If officials can abuse their power, government can ignore calls for political change, or projects can fail to achieve results without consequence, continued investment will not contribute to peace, stability and development.

More space should also be made for individual projects to operate over longer periods of time. Addressing the deeply-rooted causes of conflict is often a **gradual process**; for example, an initiative to build social cohesion cannot achieve much in just one year. The EU should also invest in policies that address **clan-related disputes** and power dynamics, and the conflicts they drive.

The EU has made significant investment in areas such as healthcare and education. Going forward, it would be better to ensure that such **investments have durable, integral peacebuilding components**, as stable peace is essential to development – it was pointed out that people cannot go to school or to the hospital if fighting breaks out. Some participants expressed a desire to see a peacebuilding cluster created in Somalia, while others disagreed.

EU-supported military, paramilitary and police units should be **trained and mentored in protection of civilians**, including the prevention of abuse and specifically gender-based violence by personnel. It was suggested that EU assistance be linked to the implementation of measures for the protection of civilians. The EU should also fund and organise more extensive programmes of **engagement by these units with the communities in which they operate**. This would not only help to protect civilians and hold personnel accountable for their behaviour, but also allow communities to advocate for themselves and input into the stabilisation process in their areas.

Such projects are best when **locally-led**. There are barriers to this in the EU's current approach. For example, many grants and tenders are very large, meaning only INGOs have the capacity to

successfully take them on. **Smaller, more specific opportunities** would create space for local CSOs who have the knowledge and capability to most effectively address local needs. This would also help to give communities a sense of participation in their own development and to build up Somali civil society more broadly. More generally, the EU should be cognisant that **conditions and needs are often specific to each locality**, as Somalia is a large and diverse country.

Similarly, **policy and legal reform efforts should be locally-led** as much as possible. The example was given of the anti-Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) law in Galmudug state. The reform was led by local politicians working alongside Somali legal scholars, in consultation with community and religious leaders. International partners and donors took a backseat. As a result, the law took just 10 months to write and pass, and was the first of its kind in the country. Comparatively, the same kind of law when introduced at a federal level was perceived as a foreign imposition. Though the text and structure were almost identical to the Galmudug bill, there was no **sense of ownership for the Somali public**. The result was significant backlash: the government minister in charge of the project was accused of being a “Westerner”. In other words, human rights can and must be safeguarded, but this must be pursued in a way that does not come across as a foreign imposition.

This principle also applies to **climate change mitigation** projects. This is an area receiving increasing attention and funding as the extent of Somalia’s vulnerability to the effects of climate change becomes clear. Such efforts must be both **conflict-sensitive and citizen-led**, with local communities not just consulted but involved at every stage. Climate is known to be a major driver of conflict.

With more than 60% of the Somali population under the age of 24, there should be additional support for **youth-specific programmes and initiatives**, both development and peacebuilding-related. International support is needed to address the issue of brain-drain: highly-qualified young people emigrate from Somalia in large numbers due to lack of economic opportunity, which only compounds existing economic problems. The EU could provide both funding and expertise in developing a strategy to address this problem. More projects to develop **youth leadership** in local communities and on the topic of peacebuilding would also be beneficial; such projects could be integrated into the education system and could help to build a wider sense of citizenship and participation in political life.

Additionally, though it is already being done to an extent, additional **support for women engaged in peacebuilding** would always be beneficial. Such investments have a snowball effect, as the more female peacebuilders who are given the tools to work in their communities, the more women and girls feel able and inspired to join them.

The EU should pay additional attention to **building up media in Somalia**. A healthy, independent media is essential both to peacebuilding and to the long-term stability of any democratic state; Europe has the resources to pursue this alongside other projects.

Many people, especially young people, are carrying significant **trauma** from years of conflict. Many were born during the Civil War and have never had the opportunity to live in a functioning, secure, democratic society. This, and the lack of socioeconomic opportunity, is a key factor in young people joining gangs and militant groups. The EU should support **initiatives to address trauma**, as there is insufficient attention paid to this currently. What support there is tends to be

concentrated in urban areas and consequentially rural youth suffer from higher rates of drug use and suicide. More **focus on aiding young people in rural settings** is needed.

A more general expansion of programmes in rural areas would also magnify the potential positive impact of the EU's partnership with Somalia. Many of these areas have particularly acute needs, and the EU should **partner with organisations outside large cities** to address those needs.