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CIVIL SOCIETY DIALOGUE NETWORK

THE ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY IN CIVILIAN CSDP

CSDN Discussion Paper

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European Peacebuilding Liaison Office (EPLO)

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Executive Summary

Civil society engagement has become an increasingly prominent feature of the European Union's (EU) Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), reflecting a broader recognition of the role civil society organisations (CSOs) play in conflict prevention, crisis management and stabilisation. Recent policy developments, including the 2023 Civilian CSDP Compact, have strengthened the EU's formal commitment to regular, inclusive and structured dialogue with civil society across all civilian missions.

Engagement with civil society can significantly enhance mission effectiveness by improving contextual understanding in mission theatres, identifying discrepancies between official narratives and the lived realities of local populations, supporting early warning and conflict sensitivity, and strengthening mission credibility and local ownership. Civil society actors are often well placed to provide insights into human security concerns, monitor the conduct of state institutions, and flag emerging tensions or risks. At the same time, engagement with civil society is closely linked to the EU's broader external action objectives, including the consolidation and support of democracy, the rule of law and respect for human rights, particularly in environments where civic space is restricted.

Despite this growing recognition and policy guidance, meaningful engagement with civil society remains uneven across civilian CSDP missions. Structural constraints include the limited integration of civil society considerations into mission mandates and planning documents, weak institutional incentives, high staff turnover, and the absence of a consolidated culture of engagement. Operational challenges further constrain engagement, including security restrictions, limited freedom of movement, confidentiality, and difficulties in sharing information or providing feedback to civil society actors. Financial and human resource limitations, including the scarcity of dedicated budgets and staff focused primarily on civil society engagement, also restrict the scope and sustainability of initiatives.

Despite these constraints, the analysis highlights that some civilian CSDP missions have developed effective and innovative approaches to civil society engagement, demonstrating the added value of sustained interaction, institutional support and local knowledge. Drawing on these examples of practice, alongside the recurring challenges identified through interviews and desk research, the key recommendations summarised in the box below were developed to strengthen the operationalisation of civil society engagement and to help bridge the gap between policy commitments and practice across civilian CSDP missions.

Recommendations

1. **Mainstream civil society engagement**

Civil society considerations should be embedded in mission mandates, planning and operational documents and staff terms of reference, with focal points positioned close to senior management to ensure visibility and coordination.

2. **Enhance practical training**

Civil society engagement should be strengthened in pre-deployment and induction training through context-specific, scenario-based modules and integrated into broader human security training.

3. **Strengthen knowledge management**

Missions should improve handover and documentation processes to ensure continuity of civil society engagement despite staff turnover.

4. **Systematise civil society mapping**

Missions should regularly map civil society actors in close coordination with EU Delegations and Member State embassies to ensure inclusive engagement and reduce the risk of engaging with GONGOs.

5. **Apply 'do no harm' pragmatically**

Consultations should prioritise safety and confidentiality without allowing overly cautious interpretations to prevent meaningful engagement.

6. **Practice inclusive engagement**

Missions should actively engage diverse and critical civil society voices, including actors outside capitals and marginalised groups, by addressing practical barriers to participation.

7. **Improve transparency and feedback**

Missions should clearly communicate their mandate and explain how civil society input informs their work, including through systematic feedback.

8. **Provide adequate resources**

Dedicated financial resources should be allocated to support sustained and inclusive civil society engagement.

9. **Use complementary engagement channels**

Where resources are limited, missions should leverage informal and indirect opportunities for engagement through EU Delegations, partners and thematic mission activities.

Objective and methodology

The 2023 Civilian CSDP Compact includes the commitment of "enhancing regular and inclusive cooperation and dialogue with civil society at all levels",[1] as well as a deliverable for all civilian CSDP missions to conduct a structured dialogue with civil society and report on its findings in 2025.

Over the years, the European External Action Service (EEAS) and CSDP missions have engaged and exchanged with civil society at various levels, in Brussels as well as in countries where missions are deployed. However, this interaction has mostly resulted from exploiting ad hoc opportunities, rather than from systematic and institutionalised practices. While academia and think tanks have thoroughly analysed EU civilian crisis management, there has been limited examination of the role of civil society in supporting these efforts, or in turn, how civilian CSDP missions support civil society.

The European Peacebuilding Liaison Office (EPLO) has a long experience in engaging with EU institutions and Member States on peace and security issues, including on CSDP-related matters. Over the last 15 years, EPLO has facilitated numerous roundtable discussions between peacebuilding civil society organisations and EU policymakers to inform strategic reviews of several CSDP missions, including in host countries. EPLO has also contributed to the formulation and substantive development of concepts and guidelines for CSDP missions and held presentations at training courses for CSDP missions' staff.

This CSDN Discussion Paper aims to take stock of civil society engagement with civilian CSDP structures, reflect on the opportunity and added value of civil society participation in supporting the EU's civilian crisis management efforts, and provide structural and operational recommendations for improved civil society engagement.

The findings draw on over a decade of direct engagement with EU institutions on matters related to CSDP, desk research and interviews with current and former civilian CSDP mission staff, EEAS and Member State officials, and civil society experts and researchers.

CSDN Discussion Papers are intended to stimulate discussion and reflection on subjects of pertinence for EU external action and peace and security.

[1] Council of the European Union, Conclusions of the Council and of the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States, Meeting within the Council, on the Establishment of a Civilian CSDP Compact, 22 May 2023, p. 12.

Background to the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy

CSDP is a core component of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and aims to enhance the EU's capacity to act externally through civilian and military crisis management capabilities.

The current structures are the result of the incremental development and integration of Member States' joint initiatives on security and defence. Evolving from earlier frameworks such as the Western European Union[2] and the **Petersberg Tasks**,[3] the Treaty of Maastricht established a CFSP pillar, which included "all questions related to the security of the Union, including the eventual framing of a common defence policy, which might in time lead to a common defence".[4] The aftermath of the Balkan wars pushed the EU towards developing operational capability, notably with the **1999 Helsinki European Council Meeting**, which introduced the Headline Goal,[5] and the **2000 Santa Maria da Feira European Council Meeting**, which identified an initial four priority areas for the EU in civilian crisis management: policing; the rule of law; civil administration; and civil protection.[6]

In 2009, the Common Security and Defence Policy was formally institutionalised with the adoption of the **Treaty of Lisbon**. In its current structure, the CSDP aims "to provide the Union with an operational capacity drawing on civilian and military assets", and is tasked to carry out "joint disarmament operations, humanitarian and rescue tasks, military advice and assistance tasks, conflict prevention and peace-keeping tasks, tasks of combat forces in crisis management, including peacemaking and post-conflict stabilisation".[7]

Since the first missions and operations were launched back in 2003, the EU has undertaken over 40 civilian and military missions and operations in Europe, Asia and Africa. As of today, there are 21 ongoing EU CSDP missions and operations, including 12 civilian, 8 military and 1 civilian and military initiative.[8]

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[2] The Western European Union (WEU) was a European intergovernmental defence and security organisation that coordinated military cooperation among its member states and served as a precursor to the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy.
[3] The Petersberg tasks stipulated that military units of WEU member states, acting under the authority of the WEU, could be deployed for humanitarian and rescue tasks, peacekeeping tasks, and tasks of combat forces in crisis management, including peacemaking.
[4] European Union. Treaty on European Union (Maastricht Treaty). Art. J(4), Official Journal of the European Communities C 191, 29 July 1992.
[5] The Headline Goal was the commitment that by 2003 the EU should be able to deploy within 60 days and sustain for at least one year a force of up to 60,000 troops capable of carrying out the full range of Petersberg tasks. See European Council. Helsinki European Council: Presidency Conclusions, 10–11 Dec. 1999.
[6] European Council. Santa Maria da Feira European Council: Presidency Conclusions, 19–20 June 2000.
[7] European Union. Consolidated Version of the Treaty on European Union, articles 42(1) and 43(1), Official Journal of the European Union C 326, 26 Oct. 2012, pp. 13–390.
[8] European External Action Service. "Missions and Operations." Accessed 13 Dec. 2025.

Civilian CSDP missions

Civilian CSDP missions deploy international and locally contracted personnel, as well as staff seconded by Member States, to support conflict prevention, crisis management and stabilisation in crisis-affected states. These missions involve police officers, judges, legal advisers and other civilian experts working independently or alongside military forces in areas such as the rule of law, security sector reform, gender, border management, institution-building and human rights protection. Their objective is to contribute to conflict resolution, civilian protection and long-term stability by strengthening governance, accountability and democratic principles through activities including training, monitoring and institutional support. Mission mandates are agreed by the Council of the EU in cooperation with host states, and operations are supported by the Civilian Operational Headquarters (CivOpsHQ) within the European External Action Service.

The Evolution of EU Engagement with Civil Society in CSDP

Initial Commitments to Civil Society Engagement

The EU's engagement with civil society in crisis management has evolved considerably since the conception of CSDP, reflecting a **growing recognition of the role CSOs play in conflict prevention and crisis response**, as well as the potential they hold in supporting the mandates of the missions.

The Presidency Conclusions from the Helsinki European Council in December 1999 represented one of the earliest attempts by Member States to develop a coherent crisis management capability within the EU institutional framework. In addition to calling for Member States to commit financial and human resources to operational capabilities for crisis management, the Conclusions also included, as an annex, an **Action Plan on Non-Military Crisis Management**. The Action Plan identified Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) as an important partner in implementation and stressed the objective of "strengthening the synergy and responsiveness of national, collective and NGO resources in order to avoid duplication and improve performance".[9]

The landmark EU Programme for the Prevention of Violent Conflicts – known as the '**Gothenburg Programme**' – which was endorsed by the European Council in June 2001, also included references to the importance of civil society as a key EU partner. In particular, the

[9] European Council. Annex 2 to Annex IV, *Presidency Report on Non-Military Crisis Management of the European Union*, 10–11 Dec. 1999.

Programme called for the EU to "build and sustain mutually reinforcing partnerships for prevention" and for civil society to be included, consulted and engaged "at all levels, from early warning and analysis to action and evaluation".[10]

The value of "NGO experience, expertise and early warning capacity" in crisis management was then made explicit with the adoption by the European Council of the **2004 Action Plan for Civilian Aspects of ESDP**,[11] which invited EU presidencies to facilitate regular information sharing sessions with civil society, and stressed the need to consider their views on the general orientation of EU civilian crisis management[12]. In 2006, the Committee for Civilian Aspects of Crisis Management (CivCom) followed up with a comprehensive **set of recommendations aimed at implementing the Action Plan commitments**.[13] These included *inter alia* regular informal exchanges between civil society and Council bodies; inclusion of civil society in fact-finding and pre-planning missions; establishment of civil society liaison functions at mission and headquarter level; and incorporation of civil society expertise in training and roster development for civilian crisis management.[14]

Adopted at a formative stage of both EU external action and its crisis management structures, these documents reflected a **general recognition of the constructive role that partnerships with civil society could play in crisis management**. However, this recognition did not translate into institutionalised frameworks or sustained practices for regular dialogue between EU institutions and civil society on peace and security[15].

Broader commitments to partnerships with civil society in external action were also highlighted in the 2016 Global Strategy for the EU's Foreign and Security Policy,[16] and reiterated by the Council with Conclusions on "EU engagement with civil society in external relations" in 2017.

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[10] Council of the European Union. *EU Programme for the Prevention of Violent Conflicts*, 7 June 2001, p. 7.

[11] Council of the European Union. *Action Plan for Civilian Aspects of ESDP*, June 2004, p. 10.

[12] *Ibid*.

[13] Council of the European Union. *Recommendations for Enhancing Co-operation with Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) in the Framework of EU Civilian Crisis Management and Conflict Prevention*, Nov. 2006.

[14] *Ibid.*, p. 4.

[15] The European Commission's 2012 Communication "*The Roots of Democracy and Sustainable Development: Europe's engagement with Civil Society in External Relations*" introduced a more strategic and structured approach to civil society engagement, establishing guidelines for EU Delegations to develop country roadmaps for engagement with CSOs. While this represents a major development in civil society engagement in EU external action, it has had little direct relevance to CSDP frameworks.

[16] The need to increase partnerships and engagement with civil society is stressed in the 2016 Global Strategy in the context of *inter alia* the EU's interests and principles, counter-terrorism, cyber security, enlargement policy and neighbourhood, societal resilience, migration, conflict settlement and global governance.

From Policy Commitment to Operational Guidance

With specific regard to CSDP, engagement with civil society assumed greater prominence during the 2010s through the development of a **series of thematic guidelines**. References to civil society and NGOs were included, *inter alia*, in a **CivCom document on lessons and best practices** of mainstreaming human rights and gender into CSDP missions,[17] in the **operational guidelines on the Protection of Civilians**,[18] and in the **operational guidelines on Gender Mainstreaming**.[19]

A **baseline study commissioned in 2015** to look at the integration of human rights and gender into CSDP also touched on civil society engagement by CSDP personnel. The study observed that engagement had increased over the years, accompanied by growing recognition of the valuable perspectives civil society can bring to CSDP missions.[20] However, it also highlighted that this engagement remained rather inconsistent and on an ad hoc basis.[21] While the study did not focus on a quantitative or qualitative analysis of civil society involvement, it offered several recommendations to enhance engagement, build trust and carry out joint initiatives.[22] A follow-up study in 2022 reinforced these findings, noting that **engagement with civil society was primarily limited to consultation, information-sharing and coordination**, with more room for improvement on training and other operational activities.[23] The study recommended once again **further engagement with civil society**, especially in **stakeholder analysis and mainstreaming gender and human rights**,[24] and highlighted the usefulness in engaging with civil society despite the constraints of the missions' mandates.[25]

The growing engagement with civil society in Brussels, along with the recognition of the valuable perspectives civil society brings to CSDP missions at country level, led the EEAS'

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[17] Committee for Civilian Aspects of Crisis Management and Political and Security Committee. *Lessons and Best Practices of Mainstreaming Human Rights and Gender into CSDP Military Operations and Civilian Missions*, 30 Nov. 2010, pp. 12 et seq.

[18] Council of the European Union. *Revised Guidelines on the Protection of Civilians in CSDP Missions and Operations*, Aug. 2010, p. 10.

[19] European External Action Service and Committee for Civilian Aspects of Crisis Management. *Civilian Operations Commander Operational Guidelines for Mission Management and Staff on Gender Mainstreaming*. 8 Oct. 2018, pp. 9 et seq.

[20] European External Action Service. *Report on the Baseline Study on Integrating Human Rights and Gender into the European Union's Common Security and Defence Policy*. Nov. 2016, p. 63.

[21] *Ibid.*, p. 62.

[22] *Ibid.*, p. 27.

[23] European External Action Service. *Report on the Follow-up Baseline Study on Integrating Human Rights and Gender Equality into the European Union's Common Security and Defence Policy*. Mar. 2022, p. 10.

[24] *Ibid.* p. 32.

[25] *Ibid.* pp. 82-83.

Civilian Planning and Conduct Capability (CPCC)[26] to develop operational guidelines for civil society engagement, published in November 2022. The **Civilian Operations Commander Operational Guidelines on Civil Society Engagement** (hereafter, the Guidelines on Civil Society Engagement) explicitly identify civil society as a key partner for missions in achieving a fundamental shift towards a more people-centred approach. Civil society is seen not only as a complementary actor in supporting the missions' mandates by providing insights and contextual understanding, but also as an agent of change. Its support and empowerment are seen as crucial for ensuring more accountability, effectiveness of public institutions, and public policies that are more focused on the needs of the citizens.[27] Compared to earlier commitments, these guidelines represent a significant step forward. They emphasise civil society's **involvement in mission planning**, call for **structured engagement**, and include **checklists of methods and priorities to guide collaboration**.[28]

Building on this evolving recognition of the role of civil society, the **2023 Civilian CSDP Compact** introduces a commitment to "**enhancing regular and inclusive cooperation and dialogue with civil society at all levels**," alongside a concrete deliverable requiring all civilian CSDP missions to conduct structured dialogue with civil society and report on its outcomes by 2025.

Taken together, these developments illustrate a **gradual but discernible shift within the CSDP from broad policy recognition of civil society's added value towards more concrete operational guidance** and expectations. While early engagement remained largely informal and uneven, the emergence of thematic guidelines, dedicated operational frameworks, and time-bound commitments reflects a growing **effort to systematise civil society engagement** within civilian CSDP. At the same time, the extent to which these policy commitments and guidance have translated into consistent and meaningful engagement in practice has been uneven. The following section therefore turns to the implementation of these frameworks at mission level, examining the practical challenges encountered in engaging with civil society, as well as to highlight emerging examples of good practice and innovation.

[26] Now CivOpsHQ.

[27] European External Action Service and Committee for Civilian Aspects of Crisis Management. *Civilian Operations Commander Operational Guidelines on Civil Society Engagement*. 9 Nov. 2022, pp. 5–8.

[28] *Ibid.,* pp. 20-29

From Guidance to Practice: Civil Society Engagement in EU Missions

The case for engaging with civil society

The need for increased involvement of civil society in peace and security efforts is well established in both policy and academic literature, and in the context of CSDP, the Guidelines on Civil Society Engagement provide a comprehensive rationale, including drawing on UN experience and practice. These arguments apply at the level of individual missions, where engagement can lead to more effective and sustainable mandate implementation, as well as in terms of advancing the EU's broader objectives in external action.

Regular interaction with civil society provides the opportunity for the missions to gain a **better understanding of the political and security environment** where they operate. Mission staff often face restrictions on movement or operate under narrowly defined mandates, mostly relying on open-source information or reporting from EU and partner institutions. In conflict contexts, engaging with civil society helps to identify discrepancies between official narratives as they are presented by local authorities and lived realities. Civil society perspectives tend to emphasise human security needs, and can provide valuable 'logistical intelligence', e.g., best practices for meetings, security requirements, local practice, etc., which can help the mission with **'do no harm' and conflict sensitivity**.

Engagement also produces **greater awareness and understanding of the mission's mandate** and work among civil society and the local population. Clarity and transparency around the operations creates more opportunity for constructive dialogue and contributes to the mission's credibility. This helps **counter disinformation** and ultimately lays the groundwork for **local buy-in and ownership**. Trust cannot be taken for granted, particularly in post-conflict contexts where the prolonged presence of international actors has often generated scepticism, fatigue, and, at times, resistance among local stakeholders. Without clear communication on scope and mandate, an EU presence risks generating unrealistic expectations among local stakeholders concerning what a mission can deliver. When such expectations are not met, this can undermine the perceived credibility of the mission, weaken trust in EU engagement more broadly, and contribute to frustration or disengagement among local actors. By contrast, sustained engagement with civil society builds **mutual trust** and can also **increase confidence** in the local authorities with whom the missions cooperate.

Local civil society organisations are often more agile than EU actors and better positioned to identify sensitive issues that national authorities may overlook or, in some cases, be implicated in. Certain organisations also monitor the conduct of state institutions, including those trained or advised by CSDP missions. Where relationships of trust are established,

civil society actors may be willing to share early indications of tension, conflict or abuse, thereby enabling missions to benefit from their **monitoring and early-warning functions**.

Finally, engagement with civil society is rooted in the EU's own external action objectives, as articulated in the 2016 Global Strategy and enshrined in Article 11 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU), which commits the Union to the development and consolidation of democracy, the rule of law, and respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. In many of the contexts in which CSDP missions operate, democratic institutions are weak and civic space is restricted, with freedom of expression and participation often severely constrained. In this environment, engagement with civil society is not merely complementary but essential: by supporting and interacting with independent civil society actors, **CSDP missions can help safeguard civic space, amplify local voices, and contribute to the practical realisation of the Union's normative commitments** on the ground.

Understanding civil society

While the Guidelines on Civil Society Engagement acknowledge the **heterogeneous nature of civil society organisations**, they only marginally address what this diversity means in practice for CSDP mission staff tasked with identifying, assessing and engaging with different civil society actors.

Firstly, civil society tends to be seen primarily through the ways people organise in **formal structures**, including non-governmental organisations, co-operatives, unions, networks or associations. In many theatres in which CSDP missions operate, civil society often extends beyond these formal setups, unlike the prevalent models in Western Europe. In many regions, key voices in civil society, including traditional leaders, women, youth or human rights defenders and activists, run the risk of being **overlooked due to their informal or ad hoc nature**.

CSOs operating in many of the contexts where CSDP missions are deployed often do not have clearly demarcated areas of work, making little distinction, for example, between work on delivering humanitarian aid, social cohesion, peacebuilding or education. These **organisations tend to have multiple mandates**, which allow them to be particularly agile in addressing emerging and evolving challenges. However, it may prove challenging for external actors to identify a specific area of work of an organisation or establish whether their activities are relevant to the mission's mandate.

In addition, it is important to take into account the role of Government-Organised Non-Governmental Organisations (**GONGOs**) in many of the contexts in which CSDP missions operate. These organisations, which are often administratively well structured, mimic civil society in the country in question, but are established or supported by governments to act as their proxy. They can notably be used to infiltrate civil society spaces and dialogue platforms, crowding out independent NGOs, and to monitor or influence dissent. GONGOs

are generally more prevalent in flawed democracies and authoritarian contexts. In such environments, CSDP mission staff may therefore need to exercise particular caution in assessing the independence, representativeness and credibility of civil society interlocutors, and to remain attentive to the risks that engagement with GONGOs may undermine inclusive dialogue or inadvertently legitimise state-controlled narratives.

Approaches to advocacy and engagement with public authorities vary significantly across regional and political contexts, with important implications for how civil society actors engage with national authorities and international partners. While Western NGOs often have dedicated staff for advocacy and institutional engagement, in other contexts CSOs operate with limited resources and fewer specialists focused on engaging authorities or multilateral actors. In practical terms, **local civil society may lack the knowledge of institutional actors and their decision-making processes**, as well as the advocacy experience needed to identify effective entry points for engagement and carry out advocacy as it is understood from an EU perspective.

Finally, it is worth noting that many civil society actors operating in a restrictive or repressive environment may **self-censor for fear of retaliation** or other repercussions. This may manifest in a reluctance to be overly critical about governmental authorities or an avoidance of certain sensitive topics. Beyond the issue of freedom of expression, it is also important to recognise that engaging in dialogue with a third-party actor, such as an EU mission, can, in itself, be perceived as a political statement. For this reason, it is essential to understand the importance of **risk mitigation** for civil society in engaging with interlocutors from CSDP missions.

Obstacles to effective engagement with civil society

The nature of the obstacles to meaningful engagement with civil society encountered by civilian CSDP missions varies considerably in degree and across the different contexts. These limitations have been consistently identified by EU officials at headquarters level as well as by mission staff deployed in the field, drawing on their direct operational experience. Together, their perspectives highlight systemic constraints that continue to shape, and in some cases limit, the scope and depth of civil society engagement in practice.

Structural obstacles

Civil society considerations have as of yet **not been fully integrated across the entire lifecycle of planning, establishing, and operating a CSDP mission**. As a result, the stated commitment to engaging civil society is often absent from mission mandates, which, at best, assign civil society only a minimal role. This omission typically extends to operational documents developed later in the process. As one interviewee noted, the failure to incorporate civil society considerations during the initial design and planning stages poses a significant barrier to effectively mainstreaming such engagement throughout the mission.

> *Once you are able to write in civil society from the PFCA to the CMC, then it will trickle down to CONOPS and the OPLAN.*[29]

The lack of focus on civil society in the missions' operational documents is further reflected in the limited attention given to engaging with civil society during both **pre-deployment training and induction training** for mission staff on arrival in theatre. Usually, the topic is only discussed marginally in sessions focused on other themes, such as the Human Rights Due Diligence Policy (HRDDP). The lack of training on civil society engagement can heighten **risk aversion** among mission staff, particularly in sensitive environments, where uncertainty about how to engage safely may lead to concerns over unintended consequences. However, it was noted by one staff member of a civilian mission that, especially among police and military staff, 'do no harm' considerations are used as "an excuse not to do anything".[30]

While civil society does not feature prominently in the missions' operational documents and training, Member States have a history of pushing strongly for civil society considerations to be a major component of strategic reviews.[31] However, one interviewee reported that this requirement has weakened and **strategic reviews are now often presented without any mention of civil society**.

> *That has been watered down. It seems to come down to who is carrying out the strategic review and has come to be seen as something nice to include.*

The Guidelines on Civil Society Engagement can be a useful starting point for mission staff to plug the gaps in staff training. However, interviewees stress that the guidelines are theoretical, rather than practical, and **mission staff struggle to adapt their universal approach to the specific mission theatre**. Following the introduction of the guidelines and the adoption of the Civilian CSDP Compact, Gender and Human Rights Advisors have faced increased pressure from headquarters to map relevant civil society actors and to update such mappings as necessary. While EU Delegations routinely conduct civil society mapping exercises and are generally equipped with dedicated budgets and expertise to do so, there

[29] Interview with member state official. PFCA refers to the Political Framework for a Crisis Approach. CMC refers to Crisis Management Concept. CONOPS refers to the Concept of Operations. OPLAN refers to the Operation Plan.

[30] Interview with CSDP mission official.

[31] Strategic reviews consist in "reassessing the parameters around the CSDP mission/operation (scenario, situation, EU interests and objectives, CSDP added value, needs and opportunities, other parties' engagement, local commitment, etc.) with the aim of providing options for a Council decision on extending, refocusing and/or terminating the CSDP action." Rehrl, J., editor. *Handbook on CSDP: The Common Security and Defence Policy of the European Union*. 4th ed., Directorate for Security Policy, Federal Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Austria, 2021. (Accessed: 12 December 2025).

is **limited synergy and coordination between EU Delegations and CSDP missions** in this area. When missions undertake efforts to map civil society, these exercises are frequently duplicative rather than complementary, leading to missed opportunities for information-sharing and strategic alignment. To date, four missions – EUAM Iraq, EUAM Ukraine, EULEX Kosovo and EUPM Moldova – have developed mission-level strategies on civil society engagement. However, the uptake of these strategies has largely remained confined to Gender and Human Rights Advisors, with limited diffusion across missions' broader operational structures.

This limited uptake reflects **the absence of an established institutional culture of civil society engagement** within CSDP missions. Where engagement has been successful, it has often depended on individual initiative rather than being systematically embedded in mission practice. As noted by one interviewee, **engagement with civil society is rarely reflected in staff terms of reference or job descriptions**, which in turn signals that such activities fall outside core professional responsibilities.

> *There is no passing on of this importance [of engaging with civil society]. It relies on personalities in the post. If people aren't interested, there is no follow up. If people aren't open to it, you have no leverage to convince them.*[32]

Efforts to engage with civil society are often hindered by **short deployments of mission staff**. As highlighted by one interviewee, "it takes months just to get to know the mission; it takes much longer to understand the context". High staff turnover within CSDP missions also disrupts the continuity of successful initiatives, undermines effective knowledge management and hampers mainstreaming efforts.

The **position of the Civil Society Adviser or focal point within the mission structure** also has a bearing on the priority accorded to civil society engagement. As highlighted in several interviews, where the Adviser or Focal Point works in close proximity to the Senior Management Team (SMT), they are more likely to succeed in mainstreaming civil society engagement across the mission. In missions without a dedicated Civil Society Adviser, Gender and Human Rights Advisors are frequently designated as civil society focal points in addition to their core responsibilities. While these multi-hatted roles can limit the time and attention devoted specifically to civil society engagement, it also places these advisors in a more advantageous position within the mission hierarchy. Typically located within the Head of Mission's Office or the Office of the Chief of Staff, they benefit from greater institutional visibility and leverage. By contrast, **dedicated Civil Society Advisers are often positioned within Operations**, which, as one interviewee observed, is perceived as "less important than

[32] Interview with EEAS official.

being a real adviser in the team of the Chief of Staff,"[33] potentially constraining their influence despite their exclusive focus on civil society engagement.

There is **no overarching requirement for mission staff to report on civil society engagement**, as it is currently limited to the human rights reporting frameworks. For this reason, not all meetings and interactions with civil society are actually reported, which further hampers knowledge management. The Guidelines on Civil Society Engagement state that the SMT "should consider including reports on engagement with civil society in its agenda on a regular basis".[34] In reality, whether or not reporting on civil society engagement is afforded priority by the SMT often depends on the level of influence of the civil society focal point or Adviser and their proximity to senior management.

Beyond the mission itself, the **willingness of the host government to engage with local civil society can represent a significant obstacle** to CSDP missions. In contexts where authorities are supportive, missions can more easily engage with civil society. However, in settings where governments are restrictive or view independent civil society actors with suspicion, opportunities for engagement are severely constrained. In such cases, missions must navigate political sensitivities carefully, often limiting civil society interaction to discreet and informal channels, which can undermine the scope and consistency of engagement or discourage engagement altogether.

Impartiality concerns constitute a structural constraint on civil society engagement, rooted in the normative and regulatory framework governing civilian CSDP missions, which in practice generates operational caution and limits the depth of engagement. The Code of Conduct and Discipline for EU Civilian CSDP Missions emphasises that mission staff must uphold neutrality, impartiality, and independence in all professional interactions.[35] Mission staff fear that close **collaboration with specific groups or organisations could be perceived as favouritism or political alignment**. This risk of undermining impartiality can lead to caution or reluctance in outreach, limiting the depth and effectiveness of civil society engagement despite its recognised value to mission objectives.

Financial obstacles

While the level of ambition in both the Guidelines on Civil Society Engagement and the Compact is high, it is not matched with sufficient financial and human resources to facilitate systematic, meaningful engagement with local civil society. One interviewee noted that the Guidelines were more applicable to missions with "bigger budgets, that have the capacity to

[33] Interview with CSDP mission official.

[34] European External Action Service and Committee for Civilian Aspects of Crisis Management. *Civilian Operations Commander Operational Guidelines on Civil Society Engagement*. 9 Nov. 2022, p. 21.

[35] Council of the European Union. *Code of Conduct and Discipline for EU Civilian CSDP Missions*. Adopted 18 July 2016, published 22 Nov. 2016.

implement a continuous programme". In many cases, **CSDP missions often lack the budget to convene civil society**, and to cover meeting costs, travel reimbursements and per diem for civil society participants. In others, there is sufficient budget to convene civil society, but internal rules prevent the mission from covering the costs of participation for civil society representatives.

In terms of human resources, among the 21 CSDP missions currently in operation, only two have a dedicated staff member focused primarily on civil society engagement. In other missions, this responsibility is generally assigned to the focal points who must incorporate it in an extensive portfolio, often including issues such as gender, climate, and human rights. This burden of competing priorities on 'multi-hatted personnel' can limit their ability to effectively fulfil commitments to civil society engagement.

Operational limitations

Depending on the Mission, engagement with civil society is often hampered also by operational constraints. The **limited territorial presence** and the **security measures** in place in some missions mean that staff are prevented from moving freely and meeting civil society actors, particularly those outside of urban hubs. This negatively affects mission understanding of the local context. One interviewee highlighted:

> *We have a lot of policies written in Brussels that we have to put into action: the Compact, CivOps Guidelines on Civil Society Engagement, human rights, gender, children in armed conflict, etc. In reality, I can't leave the [Mission] premises. I mostly monitor the human rights situation from reading open-source news articles.*

Operational restrictions regarding **security and confidentiality** mean that missions are restricted in the information they can share both with other EU actors and with civil society. Mission staff are sometimes **prevented from exchanging useful information with fellow EU actors**, for example EU Delegations, due to the type of email encryption used or a lack of secure laptops. Missions are also constrained in what they can share with the public due to confidentiality concerns. Where missions do engage in dialogue with civil society actors, civil society organisations report frustration with the **lack of a robust feedback loop** which would allow them to understand what processes they are feeding into and the impact of their inputs.

Two successful case studies

EUCAP Sahel Mali

In June 2024, a presidential decree created the institutional framework for Security Sector Reform (SSR) in Mali, comprising three pillars: a Steering Committee for SSR (*Comité d'orientation pour la réforme du secteur de la sécurité*), a Commission for SSR (*Commissariat à la réforme du secteur de la sécurité*), and Consultative Committees for Security (*Comités consultatifs de sécurité*) at regional and municipal levels.[36] The latter *Comités consultatifs de sécurité* (CCSs) aim to contribute to increased awareness-raising and exchange of information with civil society, and better consideration of the concerns of the population.

EUCAP Sahel Mali played an important role in supporting the *Commissariat à la réforme du secteur de la sécurité* (CRSS) within the Ministry of Security and Civil Protection (MSPC) in developing and implementing the CCSs, which aim to strengthen collaboration between the police, security and defence forces, and the local population. The mission, in collaboration with the Commissariat, organised several workshops to gather input from youth, women's rights organisations, civil society groups, security forces and local authorities on security-related issues. These participatory processes led to the development of a handbook that now serves as a **methodology for conducting collective security assessments and action plans** at municipality level. This approach is now in use in several Bamako municipalities, and its success has encouraged the mission and the Malian authorities to replicate the initiative in the area of community policing. As part of these efforts, the mission is also strengthening the capacity of local organisations on security-related issues, equipping them to advise local authorities and deliver training themselves.

The success of this initiative is the result of both internal factors within the mission and the specific context in which it operates. Unlike most civilian CSDP missions, EUCAP Sahel Mali has **dedicated staff members** with the main task of engaging with civil society and bridging them with local authorities. In other missions, this role is often handled by the Gender or Human Rights Adviser only as a side responsibility. Additionally, having the civil society portfolio placed under the Operations section – as opposed to the human rights and gender portfolio, which are often under Chief of Staff – while on one side makes it more difficult to be mainstreamed, on the other it allows for more operational grounding and tangible activities. The allocation of a significant **budget** also increases opportunities for impactful actions, including holding workshops and training sessions in the local language (Bambara), which enhances accessibility, reach and local authority buy-in. The presence of **local staff** in the mission has also proven key for facilitating interaction with local authorities and local

[36] République du Mali. "Décret n°2024-327/PR-RM du 04 juin 2024 fixant le cadre institutionnel de la Réforme du Secteur de la Sécurité (RSS)." *Journal Officiel de la République du Mali*, no. 12, 7 June 2024.

communities due to the language, as well as cultural sensitivity. The success of EUCAP's support to the CCSs also contributed to the Commissariat gaining prominence and legitimacy within the MSPC.

EU Mission in Armenia

Several initiatives undertaken by the European Union Mission in Armenia (EUMA) illustrate how effective outcomes can be achieved despite relatively limited resources. Due to its mandate focusing on human security and confidence-building, the mission must rely extensively on the knowledge and insights gathered through exchanging with civil society, which happens on a daily basis through its monitoring activities.

EUMA has developed several impactful initiatives. Firstly, it has established **expert consultation groups**, bringing together diverse groups of experts from various fields (e.g., media, women's rights organisations, agricultural businesses, etc.) and the mission on an ad hoc basis, usually every three months. These sessions address topics of interest to the mission, such as recent political developments, and are usually well attended, including by policy advisors for Operations and the Head of Mission. The mission has also **raised awareness** about their work through school visits and presentations to summer camps. The mission furthers its visibility through '**Civil Society Talks**', in-person discussions with key civil society actors (e.g., religious leaders, grassroot activists, local groups, media and journalists) and organisations on the topic of human security in all six of EUMA's forward operating bases in Armenia.

A key component of EUMA's work is its **school outreach programme**, which involves visits to schools to introduce EUMA's mandate, allow students to meet mission monitors, and learn more about EUMA's activities. Lastly, EUMA established 'civil society hours', which take place every one or two months. These short sessions invite Armenian **civil society experts to brief mission staff on their areas of expertise**. Recent examples include meetings on water diplomacy, church-state relations, multidimensional poverty in Armenia, propaganda and disinformation.

Beyond these structured formats, the mission is also carrying out some ad hoc efforts, for example on occasions such as the International Youth Day. Drawing on lessons learned from these activities, EUMA is now developing a civil society strategy, intended as a living document to be regularly updated to reflect needs and experiences and survive staff turnover. A strong and well-established relationship between the mission and civil society has proven **particularly beneficial for the mission's reputation among the local population**, notably in helping to counter disinformation campaigns targeting EUMA.

Recommendations

Mainstreaming

Civil society considerations should be **systematically integrated into missions' mandate and all planning and operational documents** to support mainstreaming and to ensure that engagement is adequately resourced, both in terms of human and financial capacity. References to civil society engagement, including specific objectives or targets, should be **incorporated into the terms of reference and job descriptions of staff beyond Human Rights and Gender Advisors**, particularly at senior management level. Civil Society Advisors or focal points should be formally positioned in **close proximity to the SMT** and reporting officers to strengthen coordination and visibility. In addition, **informal task forces on civil society engagement** should be established to promote a culture of engagement across the mission. Civil society should also be regularly consulted in fact-finding and pre-planning missions.

Training

Training on civil society engagement should be bolstered in both **pre-deployment and induction training**. Training should **move beyond theoretical considerations** and address the specificity of the mission context through practical methodologies, including role-play or scenario based exercises. For example, participants could be tasked with organising a discreet meeting with local civil society to gather input on the security situation in a given area. Civil society engagement should also be an integral component in training related to human security, for example, HRDDP, Protection of Civilians (POC) or International Humanitarian Law (IHL).

Knowledge management

In cases where it is not feasible for incoming mission staff to overlap with their predecessors, robust knowledge management processes are essential. Information should be systematically documented and stored to ensure that new staff or colleagues from other departments can quickly access relevant materials. **Meaningful handover documents** should be prepared for successors, including detailed records of work completed, key learnings, best practices, challenges encountered, and successes achieved. Where applicable, handovers should also include mapping documents, contact lists, and other resources necessary to **facilitate continuity** and enable similar or improved activities to be replicated effectively.

Mapping of civil society actors

CSDP missions should develop and regularly update a **comprehensive mapping of local civil society** in order to better understand the environment in which these actors operate and to identify the most influential stakeholders. A nuanced, context-specific mapping exercise underpins engagement with a broad spectrum of civil society actors, ensuring representation across diverse groups and constituencies, including marginalised communities. Cooperation with other actors, including the Delegations or Member State embassies allows for cross-checking and validation of certain actors, to avoid engaging with GONGOs. Given the human resource constraints within the mission, it is important to **capitalise on expertise and knowledge from EU institutional partners**, namely the EU Delegation in the mission theatre. Delegations, which have staff dedicated to engaging with civil society and the budget to develop Civil Society Roadmaps (CS RMs), are well-placed to share an overview of the local civil society landscape and to provide contacts. This collaboration with other actors, including also Member State embassies, should be pursued to cross-check and validate findings.

Do no harm

When organising a consultation with civil society, 'do no harm' principles should remain paramount, but should not be seen as an obstacle to engagement. Mission staff should carefully **select participants based on prior mapping exercises and recommendations from trusted sources**, and all invitees should be vetted to the extent possible. Only individuals who have been identified and formally invited should be present, and representatives of local authorities should be excluded to ensure that participants feel safe and able to speak openly. **Clear ground rules and confidentiality measures** should be communicated to all participants in advance to safeguard trust and create a secure environment for discussion.

Inclusion

Consultations with civil society should be designed to maximize inclusivity and accessibility. This includes **creating conditions that allow participation from outside the capital** by providing travel reimbursements, ensuring translation and interpretation in local languages, and selecting venues that are perceived as accessible and conducive to open participation, rather than exclusive settings such as high-end hotels where participants may feel constrained or out of place. Equally important is the need to **engage with critical voices**. While some missions tend to avoid actors expected to hold critical positions, these perspectives, often shaped less by the mission itself than by broader perceptions of the EU, are essential for understanding the context in which CSDP missions operate and for informing operational planning.

Effective communication

CSDP missions should create conditions that enable civil society to contribute relevant information by strengthening their understanding of the mission's work. This requires **proactively sharing information about the mission's mandate, tasks, dynamics, and limitations**, thereby fostering a clearer picture of its role and added value. Enhancing this knowledge base is essential, as many actors have limited familiarity with how the EU functions, and often struggle to distinguish between a CSDP mission and the EU Delegation in-country. Additionally, in interactions with civil society, it is important to be **transparent about how the information shared by civil society will be used** and to provide feedback on how previous interactions with civil society fed into operations.

Project budgets

CSDP missions should be allocated **dedicated project budgets to support civil society engagement**. Earmarked resources are essential to move beyond ad hoc or symbolic interactions, enabling missions to organise regular, inclusive consultations, provide logistical support such as travel reimbursement and interpretation, and build collaborative partnerships with a diverse range of actors, including marginalised groups.

Alternative opportunities for engagement

When budgets for civil society engagement are limited, missions should seek alternative opportunities to interact with local actors. External events organized by other stakeholders, such as EU Delegations or international NGOs, can provide valuable spaces for **informal exchange**, even if the event's focus is not directly related to the mission's work. Similarly, missions can identify innovative entry points by **leveraging the activities of colleagues**, for instance reporting officers, environmental advisors, or other thematic experts, to create additional opportunities for engagement with civil society.

Acronyms

CCS	Consultative Committees for Security
CFSP	Common Foreign and Security Policy
CivCom	Committee for Civilian Aspects of Crisis Management
CivOpsHQ	Civilian Operations Headquarters
CMC	Crisis Management Concept
CONOPS	Concept of Operations
CPCC	Civilian Planning and Conduct Capability
CRSS	Commission for Security Sector Reform
CSDP	Common Security and Defence Policy
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
CS RM	Civil Society Roadmap
EEAS	European External Action Service
EPLO	European Peacebuilding Liaison Office
ESDP	European Security and Defence Policy
EU	European Union
EUAM	EU Advisory Mission
EUCAP	EU Capacity Building Mission
EULEX	EU Rule of Law Mission
EUMA	EU Mission in Armenia
EUPM	EU Partnership Mission
GONGO	Government Organised Non-Governmental Organisation
HRDDP	Human Rights Due Diligence Policy
IHL	International Humanitarian Law
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organisation
MSPC	Ministry of Security and Civil Protection
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
OPLAN	Operation Plan
PFCA	Political Framework for a Crisis Approach
POC	Protection of Civilians
SMT	Senior Management Team
SSR	Security Sector Reform
TEU	Treaty on European Union
WEU	Western European Union