



# EU FLEXIBLE FUNDING FOR LOCALLY LED PEACEBUILDING

## CSDN Discussion Paper

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# European Peacebuilding Liaison Office (EPLO)

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# Contents

<b>EXECUTIVE SUMMARY .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>OBJECTIVE AND METHODOLOGY .....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>BARRIERS TO FUNDING LOCALLY LED PEACEBUILDING ..</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>WHAT WORKS: LESSONS FROM EU PRACTICE IN FUNDING LOCALLY LED PEACEBUILDING.....</b>	<b>7</b>
■ 1. RISK-TOLERANT AND ADAPTIVE FUNDING MODALITIES .....	8
■ 2. BRIDGING FROM SHORT TERM RESPONSE TO SUSTAINED SUPPORT .....	11
■ 3. PARTICIPATORY FUNDING MODELS.....	12
■ 4. POWER-SHIFTING SUB-GRANTING .....	14
■ 5. CONCENTRATING DECISION-MAKING IN CRISIS- AND CONFLICT-AFFECTED CONTEXTS .....	18
<b>CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS .....</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS.....</b>	<b>24</b>

## Executive Summary

A growing body of evidence demonstrates that locally led peacebuilding is more effective, sustainable, and contextually grounded than externally driven interventions. Local civil society organisations and community-based actors are often best positioned to identify conflict dynamics, respond to emerging risks, and sustain peace efforts over time. The European Union (EU) has formally recognised this reality and committed to strengthening local ownership in conflict prevention and peacebuilding. However, translation of this commitment into consistent funding practice remains uneven.

EU peacebuilding support has increasingly incorporated flexible funding approaches aimed at enabling local leadership. These approaches have been deployed across a range of instruments and contexts, illustrating how flexibility can enhance responsiveness, relevance, and impact. At the same time, the use of flexible funding remains fragmented, and promising practices have yet to be systematically embedded across EU peacebuilding financing.

A central concept guiding the analysis of this paper is ‘good flexibility’ in peacebuilding finance. Good flexibility combines predictable, multi-year support with the ability to adapt activities, budgets, and timelines as contexts evolve. It also allows for rapid responses to emerging crises or peace openings and, where possible, provides unrestricted funding that enables local actors to define priorities based on lived realities. While elements of this approach are already present within EU funding practice, they are not yet applied consistently or at scale.

Several structural barriers continue to limit the EU’s ability to fund locally led peacebuilding effectively. These include rigid funding instruments, complex compliance and reporting requirements, weak institutional handovers between short-term crisis response and longer-term support, and persistent power imbalances that position local actors primarily as implementers rather than strategic partners. Consultation with local actors has become more common, but it is often insufficiently inclusive and dominated by a narrow set of formally registered organisations.

Despite these constraints, EU experience demonstrates that more locally led approaches are achievable within existing frameworks. Adaptive and risk-tolerant funding modalities have enabled innovation in volatile contexts. In some cases, short-term response funding has been successfully transitioned into more sustained support. Participatory grant-making models have allowed conflict-affected communities to shape funding priorities, while carefully designed sub-granting arrangements have helped extend reach and strengthen local capacity. Decentralised decision-making models further show how bringing funding decisions closer to the context can improve speed, relevance, and collaboration with local peacebuilding actors.

## Recommendations

### **1. Strengthen risk-tolerant and adaptive funding modalities**

Design peacebuilding funding to reflect the realities of conflict-affected contexts by enabling adaptive programming, streamlined contract amendments, and greater tolerance for uncertainty and innovation.

### **2. Improve pathways from short-term response to sustained support**

Establish clearer institutional mechanisms to ensure initiatives launched under rapid response funding can be consolidated or scaled where they remain relevant and effective.

### **3. Embed participatory decision-making in funding processes**

Move beyond consultation by encouraging funding models that enable conflict-affected communities to shape priorities, funding allocation, and definitions of success.

### **4. Use sub-granting to shift power, not reinforce hierarchies**

Ensure sub-granting arrangements promote equitable partnerships, transparency in funding flows, proportionate compliance requirements, and long-term organisational strengthening for local actors.

### **5. Concentrate decision-making closer to conflict-affected contexts**

Strengthen the role of EU Delegations and Regional Hubs in peacebuilding decision-making by granting clearer mandates and greater authority to shape priorities, adapt funding approaches, and respond to changing conflict dynamics.

## Objective and methodology

A growing body of research has documented how a variety of donors have experimented with flexible funding modalities to rebalance power, empower local civil society organisations, and promote local ownership in peacebuilding and conflict prevention.<sup>1</sup> This report does not seek to replicate or reassess that literature. Instead, it focuses on identifying and analysing existing flexible funding practices used by the European Union to support locally led peacebuilding activities. In doing so, it highlights how flexibility has

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<sup>1</sup> Niklas Balbon et al., *Building Peace, the Feminist Foreign Policy Way: Good Practices* (Global Public Policy Institute (GPPi), 2023), <https://gppi.net/2023/08/01/feminist-foreign-policy>; '10 Radical Actions', Radical Flexibility Fund, accessed 18 September 2025, <https://radicalflexibility.org/>.

already been operationalised within EU instruments and programming, and what can be learned from these experiences.

The analysis draws on illustrative examples of EU practice, including the Colombia Trust Fund, the European Endowment for Democracy, and programmes implemented by the European Commission's Service for Foreign Policy Instruments (FPI), as well as more informal, locally driven approaches supported by EU Delegations (EUDs) and implemented primarily through partnerships with international non-governmental organisations (INGOs). The report examines EU peacebuilding funding across a range of contexts – Central African Republic (CAR), Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Sudan, Kenya, Tanzania, Mozambique, Yemen, Mali and Iraq – to capture variation in flexible approaches across instruments, regions, and conflict settings. These cases are used to distil lessons and inform a set of recommendations aimed at strengthening the EU's use of flexible funding in support of locally led peacebuilding.

Methodologically, the report is based on a review of relevant academic and policy literature,<sup>2</sup> complemented by interviews with both EU officials and representatives of international and local civil society organisations implementing EU-funded projects. It also builds on a body of previous research that has included extensive interviews with EU officials on flexible funding mechanisms;<sup>3</sup> systematic analysis of localisation in international peace, security and development funding;<sup>4</sup> and examinations of how feminist foreign policy approaches can be operationalised through alternative funding models for peacebuilding.<sup>5</sup>

## Defining 'good flexibility' in financing for peace

Understanding how flexibility supports locally led peacebuilding requires a clear definition of what 'good flexibility' entails in practice. This paper defines 'good flexibility' as that which provides reliable, long-term funding to peacebuilding partners while also remaining responsive when opportunities or crises arise. In this sense, it borrows from the principles noted by Peace Direct in an upcoming report:<sup>6</sup>

<sup>2</sup> This included EU reports of its own efforts in this space, reviews of EU-funded activities and research into EU peacebuilding funding.

<sup>3</sup> Abi Watson and Philipp Rotmann, 'Peace in Numbers: What Do Shifts in Funding Tell Us About EU Priorities?', Global Public Policy Institute (GPPi), June 2025, <https://gppi.net/2025/06/12/peace-in-numbers-what-do-shifts-in-funding-tell-us-about-eu-priorities>; Abi Watson and Julia Friedrich, *A Growing Gap: EU Peace and Security Funding Beyond Ukraine* (Global Public Policy Institute (GPPi), 2024), <https://gppi.net/2024/09/30/eu-peace-and-security-funding-beyond-ukraine>.

<sup>4</sup> Melissa Li et al., 'Peace & Security Aid in Crisis', Global Public Policy Institute (GPPi), July 2025, <https://gppi.net/2025/07/09/peace-security-aid-in-crisis-rethinking-civilian-investment-and-local-leadership>.

<sup>5</sup> Balbon et al., *Building Peace, the Feminist Foreign Policy Way*.

<sup>6</sup> Peace Direct, 'Funding Freedom: Models, Stories and Strategies for Making Flexible Funding Work', upcoming. See also: *Transforming Partnerships in International Cooperation: A Practical Resource for Civil Society, Donors, INGOs and Intermediaries* (Peace Direct, n.d.), accessed 18 September 2025,

- **Long-term commitment** in the form of multi-year funding that allows for organisational or movement strengthening rather than rigidly outlined activities.
- **Ability to adapt** funding allocations, approaches and timelines according to the changing context.
- **Responsiveness and speed**, allowing for changes to be made quickly to meet needs as they arise.
- **Unrestricted where possible**, allowing recipients of funding to determine their own priorities.

The Funding for Real Change initiative argues that “flexible, multiyear grants, anchored in trust, are not only the right way to build grantee partnerships but also the smart way for grant makers to create more impact, advance equity, and strengthen grantee organisations for the long run.”<sup>7</sup> A key reason for this is because such funding enables civil society organisations (CSOs), as well as less clearly structured organisations, like community, activist, youth, religious or women's groups, to design and adapt projects in line with evolving circumstances and community needs, thereby strengthening local ownership.

This is important because research consistently shows that people affected by conflict often have the most sustainable solutions to address its drivers.<sup>8</sup> Conflict affected communities are uniquely positioned to detect early warning signs of tension, to respond in gender-sensitive ways, and to work inclusively with both state and non-state actors.<sup>9</sup> Their perspectives are vital in ensuring interventions reflect the lived experiences of women, youth, and marginalised groups, while avoiding the reinforcement of existing inequalities. In many conflict-affected contexts, CSOs and community groups are embedded in the social fabric and are able to convene the right people, articulate citizens’

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<https://www.peacedirect.org/content/uploads/2023/10/Peace-Direct-Transforming-Partnerships-Report-English.pdf>; Riva Kantowitz, *Radical Flexibility - Strategic Funding for the Age of Local Activism* (Peace Direct, n.d.), accessed 18 September 2025, <https://www.peaceinsight.org/reports/peacefund/>.

<sup>7</sup> Amy Bates Markham and Katie Smith Milway, *Accelerating Equitable Grantmaking: Seizing the Moment to Norm Multiyear, Flexible Funding* (Funding for Real Change, 2022), <https://philea.issuelab.org/resource/accelerating-equitable-grantmaking-seizing-the-moment-to-norm-multiyear-flexible-funding.html>.

<sup>8</sup> Abi Watson et al., ‘Scaling up Insecurity? Risks of the UK’s Persistent Engagement Strategy in Kenya and Somalia’, Saferworld, October 2022, <https://www.saferworld.org.uk/resources/publications/1405-how-to-scale-up-the-ukas-persistent-engagement-strategy-in-kenya-and-somalia>.

<sup>9</sup> EPLO, EU Support for Local Peacebuilding through the ‘Conflict Prevention, Peacebuilding and Crisis Preparedness’ Component of the NDICI-Global Europe Thematic Programme on Peace Stability and Conflict Prevention: Gathering Civil Society Input (2022), [https://eplo.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/2022-12-May-CSDN-FIM-on-EU-Support-to-Local-Peacebuilding\\_Meeting-Report.pdf](https://eplo.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/2022-12-May-CSDN-FIM-on-EU-Support-to-Local-Peacebuilding_Meeting-Report.pdf).

concerns, hold governments accountable, and counter disinformation.<sup>10</sup> Strengthening their capacities is therefore a building block of resilient societies and long-term peace.<sup>11</sup>

## Barriers to funding locally led peacebuilding

The EU formally recognises the importance of partnering with local actors to ensure peacebuilding activities reflect local priorities. It asserts that “[w]orking with local actors in partner countries and reinforcing their capacities is a cornerstone of any conflict prevention and peacebuilding strategy.”<sup>12</sup> It is also clear that many EU officials, especially those in Delegations, have a clear commitment to strengthening local ownership. In interviews, officials frequently noted that the EU’s role should be to reinforce and build upon what is already in place, rather than promoting external models. However, this commitment is not yet fully reflected in funding patterns: while the EU disbursed the largest amount of peacebuilding funding to local civil society in 2023 in absolute terms (\$7.8 million) compared to other donors, this represented only 1.5% of total EU peacebuilding support reaching local organisations.<sup>13</sup>

This **low proportion of funding reaching local civil society** is largely explained by the fact that EU peacebuilding support is channelled primarily through INGOs, United Nations (UN) agencies and other international organisations, with **local organisations most often engaged as implementing partners or sub-grantees**. Accessing EU funding remains resource-intensive, often requiring sustained engagement with officials at headquarters, EU Delegations, or both, as well as the administrative capacity to navigate **complex application, compliance, and reporting requirements** – demands that many local organisations are unable to meet.<sup>14</sup>

**Structural rigidity** further limits responsiveness to local realities. Many EU funding instruments remain rigid and highly bureaucratic, constraining their ability to respond to evolving local and regional dynamics. Programmable funding under the geographic pillar of NDICI–Global Europe<sup>15</sup> has been described as a “steam tanker”,<sup>16</sup> once set in motion, it is

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<sup>10</sup> Action Document for the Support to In-Country Civil Society Actors in Conflict Prevention, Peacebuilding and Crisis Preparedness (European Union, n.d.), accessed 18 September 2025, [https://fpi.ec.europa.eu/document/download/92745ed5-3449-4061-8c37-cb14507a6ec2\\_en?filename=Annex%201.pdf](https://fpi.ec.europa.eu/document/download/92745ed5-3449-4061-8c37-cb14507a6ec2_en?filename=Annex%201.pdf).

<sup>11</sup> Li et al., ‘Peace & Security Aid in Crisis’.

<sup>12</sup> European Commission, “Multi-annual indicative programme. NDICI-Global Europe – Thematic Programme on Peace, Stability and Conflict Prevention 2021-2027,” (n.d) accessed December 16, 2024, <https://tinyurl.com/4bwpkdr3>.

<sup>13</sup> Li et al., ‘Peace & Security Aid in Crisis’.

<sup>14</sup> Li et al., ‘Peace & Security Aid in Crisis’.

<sup>15</sup> Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument – Global Europe (NDICI – Global Europe)

<sup>16</sup> Watson and Friedrich, A Growing Gap.

difficult to redirect. As one INGO interviewee remarked, “the civil war will be over by the time you have asked Brussels for funding.”<sup>17</sup>

These structural constraints are compounded by **weak institutional handovers between short-term crisis response and longer-term programming**. Interviews indicated that initiatives launched through rapid response mechanisms are rarely taken up or sustained by longer-term instruments. As one interviewee noted, “the gap is not just in the immediate response but between rapid action and long-term engagement ... FPI has been of huge added value ... but the issue is the follow up.”<sup>18</sup> As a result, interventions often end abruptly after 18–30 months, despite continued local need.<sup>19</sup>

While efforts are often made to consult local actors and incorporate local perspectives into funding and programming decisions, these processes are not always sufficiently inclusive or representative. **Consultation processes** which seek to give a voice to local actors in funding and programming decisions can be **superficial or exclusionary**. The same small group of local elites is often repeatedly consulted by different INGOs, with limited verification of how representative these voices are of their wider communities.<sup>20</sup> Discussions also tend to privilege formally registered CSOs, **sidelining groups who are organised in more informal ways** but have significant impacts in their communities, for example, religious and traditional organisations, youth groups and women-led organisations. Excluding these actors risks overlooking important conflict dynamics, as well as innovative and potentially transformative approaches to peacebuilding.<sup>21</sup>

Beyond access and consultation, **power imbalances** also shape whose knowledge, priorities, and perspectives ultimately inform peacebuilding strategies. In practice, **agenda-setting processes are often dominated by INGOs**, which tend to lead discussions with donors and international experts, shape programme narratives, and publish findings or present results with **limited recognition of local partners’ contributions**.<sup>22</sup> As a result, local actors are frequently positioned as implementers rather than strategic partners, with little influence over broader priorities or key design decisions. Elsewhere it has been shown that local partners “generally did not play a role in setting broader priorities or in addressing strategic questions within peacebuilding programs”, reinforcing patterns of marginalisation that undermine local ownership.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Watson and Friedrich, A Growing Gap.

<sup>18</sup> Watson and Friedrich, A Growing Gap.

<sup>19</sup> Watson and Friedrich, A Growing Gap.

<sup>20</sup> Li et al., ‘Peace & Security Aid in Crisis’.

<sup>21</sup> European Peacebuilding Liaison Office (EPLO). 2022. EU Support for Local Peacebuilding through the “Conflict Prevention, Peacebuilding and Crisis Preparedness”

<sup>22</sup> DAI Europe. Final Sector Evaluation of IcSP Support to In-Country Civil Society Actors in Conflict Prevention, Peacebuilding and Crisis Preparedness. Final Report. Brussels: European Union, October 2022. Project No. 2018/5863.

<sup>23</sup> Li et al., ‘Peace & Security Aid in Crisis’.

Sub-granting arrangements, while often designed to extend EU funding to local actors, can in practice reinforce existing financial and political hierarchies between INGOs and local civil society organisations. Financially, INGOs are more likely to receive funding directly and to retain a disproportionate share of resources through higher salaries and overheads.<sup>24</sup> They are also more likely to benefit from core funding, while local CSOs depend on **short-term contracts that rarely cover organisational costs**.<sup>25</sup> Politically, local CSOs are often treated primarily as **service providers rather than partners to be developed for future leadership**. Limited investment in long-term capacity development further entrenches these inequalities and reinforces the continued dominance of INGOs in fragile and conflict-affected contexts.

Institutional factors within the EU also shape outcomes in funding locally led conflict prevention and peacebuilding. **High workloads, staff turnover, and uneven levels of institutional support** can constrain officials' ability to apply risk-tolerant approaches and adapt programming in response to complex and evolving contexts. Interviewees noted that momentum was sometimes lost during transitions between portfolio managers, particularly where incoming staff had less exposure to the specific context or applied EU rules more stringently. As one interviewee observed, "Good practice is when staff have had bandwidth to be actively engaged in the grant, and bad practice is when the focal point disappears."<sup>26</sup>

Taken together, these obstacles highlight a persistent gap between the EU's stated commitment to localisation and the structural, procedural, and institutional realities of its funding systems. Rigid instruments, unequal sub-granting arrangements, narrow consultation practices, and internal capacity constraints all combine to constrain the possibilities of providing flexible funding to locally led peacebuilding actors.

## What Works: Lessons from EU Practice in Funding Locally Led Peacebuilding

Despite these constraints, the EU has developed a number of promising practices that demonstrate **how greater flexibility in funding design and implementation can enhance responsiveness to locally led peacebuilding**. These examples are not isolated pilot exercises, but practices already embedded, albeit unevenly, across EU instruments and contexts. While bureaucratic procedures and the relatively limited share of resources allocated to

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<sup>24</sup> Li et al., 'Peace & Security Aid in Crisis'; DAI Europe. Final Sector Evaluation of IcSP Support to In-Country Civil Society Actors in Conflict Prevention, Peacebuilding and Crisis Preparedness. Final Report. Brussels: European Union, October 2022. Project No. 2018/5863.

<sup>25</sup> Abi Watson and Fennet Habte, 'Digital Threats to Elections: Learning From What Has Worked in Africa', Global Public Policy Institute (GPPi), July 2024, <https://gppi.net/2024/07/09/digital-threats-to-elections-learning-from-what-has-worked-in-africa>.

<sup>26</sup> Online interview, 6<sup>th</sup> September 2025

peacebuilding continue to pose challenges, these examples show that when funding rules, timelines, and decision-making processes are applied flexibly, EU support is better able to align with local priorities, adapt to evolving conflict dynamics, and enable local actors to take the lead in shaping interventions. Crucially, they illustrate that the EU is not starting from scratch in advancing localisation but can build on approaches that are already in use across different instruments and contexts.

The following section examines five areas where such practices have proven particularly effective:

1. Developing risk-tolerant and adaptive funding modalities
2. Bridging from short term response to sustained support
3. Developing participatory funding models that give conflict-affected communities a meaningful role in shaping decisions.
4. Ensuring sub-granting arrangements shift power and build local capacity, rather than entrenching hierarchies
5. Concentrating meaningful EU funding decisions in crisis- and conflict-affected contexts

## ■ 1. Risk-tolerant and adaptive funding modalities

Effectively financing peacebuilding requires funding modalities that can operate in high-risk environments and adapt to rapidly evolving political contexts. This requires mechanisms that are both flexible and capable of quick deployment in response to developments on the ground. Such mechanisms can enable timely responses with relatively modest resources when crises emerge, or opportunities arise to advance peace. There are instances in which the EU and its officials have established such funding mechanisms, highlighting two factors that are critical to enhancing flexibility, and ultimately the effectiveness of EU peacebuilding support: **higher risk tolerance** and **adapting to changing political and conflict dynamics**.

### Higher risk tolerance

Funding mechanisms that demonstrate a greater willingness to assume calculated risks have been shown to facilitate innovation and generate more sustainable outcomes. A prominent example is the **European Endowment for Democracy (EED)**, an “independent, grant-making organisation, established in 2013 by the European Union and EU member states as an autonomous International Trust Fund to foster democracy in the European Neighbourhood, the Western Balkans, Turkey and beyond.”<sup>27</sup> EED was created to address

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<sup>27</sup> European Endowment for Democracy, ‘About EED’, accessed 18 September 2025, <https://democracyendowment.eu/about/about-eed>.

gaps in existing EU instruments by offering a more flexible funding modality with a **higher tolerance for political and operational risk**. Its rapid response capacity and contextual adaptability enable it to **support groups and activists that cannot be reached through traditional EU funding channels**. The model has been widely praised. In its 10-year anniversary report, Michael Meyer-Resende, at Democracy Reporting International, said: “amid such uncertainty, we can at least count on EED to continue playing its vital role in supporting activists respond to democratic trends.”<sup>28</sup>

The NDICI-GE rapid response mechanism managed by FPI has arguably created greater scope for risk-taking in EU funding, largely due to its limited duration of up to 18 months. The mechanism is designed to provide rapid and flexible support over short timeframes, with activities eligible for up to two extensions of six months each. Beyond this period, it is strongly recommended that activities be continued through country-level Multiannual Indicative Programmes (MIPs) under the NDICI-GE geographic pillar. This **short funding horizon** can incentivise a higher tolerance for risk, thereby **enabling innovation and the piloting of new approaches** that might not be feasible under longer-term, more rigid funding arrangements.

## **Adaptive funding in volatile contexts**

### **Adapting under force majeure and escalating conflict**

Flexible funding allocations that can adapt to local needs have enabled programmes to continue operating in conflict-affected and fragile contexts. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the EU demonstrated a willingness to support grantees in adjusting their programming in response to rapidly changing conditions. Most EU contracts include force majeure clauses that allow for the suspension or termination of activities when circumstances render implementation excessively dangerous or difficult. Such suspensions can have serious consequences for NGOs, including difficulties in paying staff salaries or the need to reduce personnel during periods of interrupted funding. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the EU demonstrated a more **flexible application of force majeure provisions**, enabling beneficiaries to **adapt programming to the new conditions**. Many beneficiaries were permitted to **reallocate budget lines, negotiate budget amendments, and apply for no-cost extensions**, thereby avoiding programme suspension or closure.<sup>29</sup> For numerous organisations, this approach was decisive in ensuring continued operations and, in some cases, enabled teams to adapt effectively to evolving conditions on the ground. For example, the “significant flexibility” provided in an EU-funded project implemented by Search for Common Ground, aimed at strengthening social cohesion and targeting groups least trusting of COVID-19

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<sup>28</sup> Hani Abbas, *EED: Supporting Democracy for 10 Years* (European Endowment for Democracy, 2018), <https://democracyendowment.eu/assets/pdfs/EED-supporting-democracy-10-years.pdf>

<sup>29</sup> European Peacebuilding Liaison Office (EPLo, EU Support for Local Peacebuilding through the ‘Conflict Prevention, Peacebuilding and Crisis Preparedness’ Component of the NDICI-Global Europe Thematic Programme on Peace Stability and Conflict Prevention: Gathering Civil Society Input.

messaging and responses, enabled the team “to respond to both new data and the evolving pandemic.”<sup>30</sup>

The experience of the COVID-19 pandemic illustrates the value of institutional flexibility in sustaining programming under conditions of uncertainty. Similar flexibility should be systematically extended to conflict-affected and fragile contexts, where force majeure conditions such as **sudden outbreaks of violence, political instability, or climate-induced shocks are recurring features rather than exceptional events**. Applying the same adaptive approach used during the pandemic not only mitigates operational disruptions but also enhances the EU’s capacity to maintain continuity, responsiveness, and impact in its peacebuilding and development initiatives.

Interviews revealed several instances in which CSOs in receipt of FPI funding were permitted to **revise project designs in response to evolving conflict dynamics**, thereby enabling the continuation of activities and a more precise alignment with local priorities. For instance, following the outbreak of war in Sudan in April 2023, both Concordis International and Nonviolent Peaceforce (NP) highlighted how helpful staff in FPI were in enabling programmes to re-work their plans. In the case of Concordis, project implementation was severely disrupted for approximately six months due to security risks, travel restrictions, communication challenges, and the significant impact of the conflict on staff wellbeing. After consultations on feasibility, FPI authorised a **revision of the project logframe, shifting the focus** from addressing historical grievances to more pragmatic activities related to land use and genocide prevention. This adjustment proved highly effective, with an estimated 70–90 percent of crops successfully harvested despite ongoing hostilities. As one member of staff from Concordis noted, “they could have cancelled the contract but gave us time and we were able to achieve much more”.<sup>31</sup>

As part of the Nashiriki Kwa Masikilizano project in the DRC (a project funded by the EU and implemented by a consortium led by the Norwegian Refugee Council)<sup>32</sup>, International Alert worked with FPI to adapt programming when intercommunal violence spiralled out of control in Ituri province. The team was working with youth groups to build an intercommunal youth centre. When violence erupted many young people had to move away from the area and for six weeks it was very difficult to continue construction. FPI authorised a **no-cost extension**, allowing the team to relocate away from the affected area, and **resume implementation once conditions had stabilised** and it was safe to return.

While the **willingness to allow projects to adapt under force majeure conditions** represents a positive and necessary evolution in EU funding practice, it nonetheless entails a significant administrative burden for both implementing partners and EU staff. Renegotiating project

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<sup>30</sup> Email interview, 9<sup>th</sup> September 2025

<sup>31</sup> Online interview, 6<sup>th</sup> September 2025

<sup>32</sup> Simon Hilditch, ‘From Despair to Hope: Rebuilding Trust in Eastern DRC’, International Alert, 6 February 2024, <https://www.international-alert.org/stories/from-despair-to-hope-rebuilding-trust-in-eastern-drc/>.

parameters, revising logframes and budgets, and securing formal approvals for amendments can be **time-consuming and resource-intensive**, particularly in contexts already constrained by insecurity and limited operational capacity. Streamlining these procedural requirements, especially in conflict-affected settings, would help ensure that the flexibility granted in principle translates more consistently into timely and effective operational adaptation.

### Leveraging positive developments

Adaptability is required not only to manage crises or force majeure conditions, but also to capitalise on positive developments – such as peace openings or shifts in local dynamics – that create new opportunities for progress. FPI issued a  **rider to an existing contract**  with Concordis to authorise the inclusion of cattle vaccination activities. This decision followed an in-depth assessment by Concordis to understand why herders were not adhering to approved transhumance routes. According to Concordis, “FPI was brilliant” in its willingness to trust the process, listen to local insights, and respond to evidence emerging from consultations on what would be most effective.<sup>33</sup> The resulting project used cattle vaccination as an entry point to strengthen regulatory structures: herders paid taxes and registered their cattle, and in return, their livestock were vaccinated while the government worked to enhance security. The vaccination campaign was implemented in partnership with the Ministry of Livestock and the National Federation of Herders in CAR. This flexibility allowed an **EU-funded intervention to move beyond risk mitigation and actively leverage emerging opportunities** to reinforce governance and peacebuilding outcomes.

## ■ 2. Bridging from short term response to sustained support

The design of NDICI–GE funding modalities recognises the importance of linking short-term, crisis-response interventions with longer-term support, in order to provide the predictability needed for effective and flexible peacebuilding. When conditions allow, initiatives launched through **short-term funding can be sustained or scaled up** through follow-on support, particularly where EU focal points have the **expertise to identify promising interventions** and where **coordination across EU services is effective**.

Where these conditions are met, short-term crisis-response funding can be successfully transitioned into more sustained support. For instance, FPI supported International Alert in gaining further funding for their social cohesion programming in Ituri, DRC. Project staff assert that the focal point within FPI’s Regional Hub in Nairobi “100% understood this project and the importance of what we were trying to achieve”.<sup>34</sup> The official possessed extensive expertise in social cohesion programming and recognised the critical importance of designing robust processes that foster community engagement. When it became evident

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<sup>33</sup> Online interview, 6<sup>th</sup> September 2025

<sup>34</sup> Online interview, 10<sup>th</sup> September 2025

that certain elements of the project required further reinforcement to ensure their sustainability in the highly volatile context of Ituri, the FPI official actively advocated for a **second phase of programming, aimed at consolidating outcomes** and safeguarding these essential initiatives.

Similarly, Concordis worked with the EU to scale up two smaller grants, funded by FPI in CAR and Sudan, into multi-country work funded by NDICI-GE's programmable funding. Importantly, the smaller FPI grants gave space for co-design with Concordis' local Advisory Group (made up of peacebuilders from Chad, Cameroon, Darfur and CAR), so that they were "at the heart of designing the programme".<sup>35</sup> FPI not only covered the costs of this consultation, but new funding was also given retroactively to ensure that there was no gap in funding for salaries and activities between the end of the two short-term FPI projects and the longer-term initiative funded by DG INTPA.

### ■ 3. Participatory funding models

Participatory funding models matter not only because they **enhance legitimacy**, but because involving those affected by conflict in decisions about how funds are allocated **improves relevance, accountability, conflict sensitivity**, and ultimately programme **effectiveness**. For this reason, the EU has, at times, supported approaches that promote greater ownership in conflict-affected communities through community-led funding decisions and governance models. These participatory grant-making processes enable those most affected by conflict to influence funding priorities and resource allocation, illustrating how locally informed decision-making can strengthen peacebuilding outcomes.

#### **Shared governance of peacebuilding funds**

To respond to "the opportunities presented by developments in the Northern Ireland peace process during 1994, especially the announcements of cessation of violence by the main republican and loyalist paramilitary organisations",<sup>36</sup> the EU created the PEACE I and II programmes. The programmes, allocated €500 million between 1995–1999, channelled resources into locally designed initiatives ranging from women's cross-community networks to youth training and cultural projects. Despite the scale of the overall financial allocation, deliberate efforts were made to **ensure spending was guided by locally identified priorities** and need. **Governance arrangements were shared** through a Programme Monitoring Committee (PMC) and a Consultative Forum, which brought together local government, trade unions, community groups, farmers, business leaders, and civil society - ensuring

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<sup>35</sup> Online interview, 6<sup>th</sup> September 2025

<sup>36</sup> Peace Platform 'PEACE I Overview', accessed 19 September 2025, <https://peaceplatform.seupb.eu/en/story-of-peace/peace-programmes/peace-i-overview/>.

decisions reflected grassroots priorities and not just institutional agendas.<sup>37</sup> By the conclusion of PEACE II, more than 15,000 projects had received EU support.<sup>38</sup> As a result, resources reached communities across the divide, enabling citizens to take collective risks and sustain momentum for peace, even during periods when formal political progress stalled.<sup>39</sup>

### **Participatory and community-led funding decisions**

Drawing on consultations with local CSOs, Saferworld developed a new grant mechanism which was funded by the EU and provided ten Yemeni organisations with flexible funding.<sup>40</sup> Grants typically ran for one year and ranged between \$30,000 and \$50,000 per organisation, with a high degree of flexibility in how funds could be used.<sup>41</sup> **Project selection** was based on a **peer review process**, in which applicant organisations assessed each other's proposals against a standardised set of criteria developed by Saferworld.<sup>42</sup> Through this process, Saferworld supported locally-led initiatives in a way that “ensure[d] Yemen's path to peace is Yemeni-owned”.<sup>43</sup>

A key component of the EU-funded Community Safety Partnership project, also in Yemen, focused on locally driven community safety initiatives. Implemented by Berghof Foundation and Political Development Forum Yemen in five cities, the project provided €60,000 to **Community Safety Committees**, composed of police, civil defence, and community members, which were **responsible for determining how the funds were spent**.<sup>44</sup> Funds were used to upgrade police stations and civil defence centres, establish new units, and supply essential firefighting, rescue, and medical equipment. These investments improved responses to emergencies, crime, and drug abuse, strengthened service delivery for millions of residents, and enhanced everyday safety. In Aden, for example, improved policing and surveillance enabled residents, particularly women, to feel safer moving around markets and public spaces, even in the evenings.

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<sup>37</sup> The Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB) 'PEACE', SEUPB, accessed 18 September 2025, <https://www.seupb.eu/past-programmes/peace>.

<sup>38</sup> Gina McIntyre, *30 Years of EU Peacebuilding in Northern Ireland: Insights from the Special EU Programmes Body* (IIEA, 2025), <https://www.iiea.com/blog/30-years-of-eu-peacebuilding-in-northern-ireland-insights-from-the-special-eu-programmes-body>.

<sup>39</sup> Larry Attree and Abigail Watson, *How Guns Fall Silent: Analysing Examples of Relative Success in Integrated Stabilisation* (Saferworld, 2022), <https://www.saferworld.org.uk/resources/publications/1390-how-guns-fall-silent-analysing-examples-of-relative-success-in-integrated-stabilisation>.

<sup>40</sup> Email interview, 12<sup>th</sup> September 2025

<sup>41</sup> 'Civil Society Solidarity Fund Supports Yemeni Organisations with Small Grants', Saferworld, April 2020, <https://www.saferworld-global.org/resources/news-and-analysis/post/868-civil-society-solidarity-fund-supports-yemeni-organisations-with-small-grants>.

<sup>42</sup> *Innovative Practices: Changing the International System to Better Enable Local Leadership* (Conducive Space for Peace, 2023), <https://usercontent.one/wp/www.conducivespace.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Innovative-Practices.pdf?media=1676380011>.

<sup>43</sup> Saferworld, 'Civil Society Solidarity Fund Supports Yemeni Organisations with Small Grants'.

<sup>44</sup> Online interview, 17<sup>th</sup> September 2025

An FPI-funded project implemented by Nonviolent Peaceforce in Iraq illustrates how participatory funding models can **balance accountability requirements with meaningful local agency**. The programme design deliberately created space for youth to co-design activities within clearly defined parameters. Building on NP's prior engagement, the approach recognised that young people possessed strong, context-specific ideas for addressing online hate speech, violent extremism, and extortion, particularly targeting women.<sup>45</sup> While NP was required to develop a logframe fully aligned with EU impact, outcome, and output indicators to enable aggregation and reporting across contexts, the project design allowed flexibility in how these indicators were framed and operationalised. This flexibility enabled NP and its partners to **define locally appropriate indicators and measurement approaches**, thereby embedding youth participation not only in activity design but also in **how success was understood and assessed**. As a result, young people were able to shape interventions that were more responsive to local drivers of online violence and more effective in fostering inclusive peace.<sup>46</sup>

#### ■ 4. Power-shifting sub-granting

Given the difficulties of accessing EU funding the primary avenue for conflict affected communities to access EU funding is often through sub-granting. The EU often provides funding to international actors such as UN agencies or INGOs, which then work directly with formally registered local CSOs or sub-grant to smaller community groups, including religious and traditional organisations, youth groups and women-led organisations. A range of EU funding instruments have made use of sub-granting models to facilitate this approach.<sup>47</sup> Sub-granting “has enabled funds to reach many local organisations and groups of people that may otherwise not have been able to meet EU criteria for funding.”<sup>48</sup> If done well, such relationships can empower local CSOs and community groups **by developing their capacity**, giving them **ownership** over projects, removing some of the burdensome administrative tasks and **absorbing some political risks**.<sup>49</sup>

##### **Grant holding arrangements**

EU officials have approached **INGOs to play a grant holding role** for local groups to ensure that they can receive EU funding, even when they do not meet financial compliance

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<sup>45</sup> Nonviolent Peaceforce, *Protection for Youth, by Youth: Youth, Peace and Security and Unarmed Civilian Protection* (Nonviolent Peaceforce, n.d.), accessed 18 September 2025, [https://nonviolentpeaceforce.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/YPS\\_UCP.pdf](https://nonviolentpeaceforce.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/YPS_UCP.pdf).

<sup>46</sup> Online interview, 10<sup>th</sup> September 2025

<sup>47</sup> Li et al., 'Peace & Security Aid in Crisis'.

<sup>48</sup> European Peacebuilding Liaison Office (EPLO). 2022. EU Support for Local Peacebuilding through the “Conflict Prevention, Peacebuilding and Crisis Preparedness”

<sup>49</sup> DAI Europe. Final Sector Evaluation of IcSP Support to In-Country Civil Society Actors in Conflict Prevention, Peacebuilding and Crisis Preparedness. Final Report. Brussels: European Union, October 2022. Project No. 2018/5863.

standards. FPI officials collaborated with a coalition of Malian civil society and digital media organisations to develop a project aimed at strengthening citizen participation, peacebuilding, and digital activism. The final project involved a diverse range of local organisations, including those promoting inclusive governance and youth engagement (AJCAD, Think Peace, Benbere), as well as professional associations representing media practitioners and bloggers (APPEL Mali, ABM, Doniblog). FPI approached Search for Common Ground to **manage the project's funding** and to implement certain activities directly, including a training component.<sup>50</sup> The most relevant initiatives were supported through an innovation fund and a **small grants facility**, which enabled resources to be channelled to selected organisations for locally driven initiatives and other ad hoc activities. This approach allowed the EU to reach organisations that did not meet standard EU compliance requirements and would otherwise have been excluded from accessing EU funding altogether.

### **Capacity building for sustainability**

Many EU-funded projects now include dedicated capacity-building components to ensure that sub-granting **arrangements strengthen local CSOs' ability to access international funding independently** and improve their **long-term financial sustainability**. Mentorship, training and capacity building of local CSOs and community groups is a core part of many of the projects explored in interviews for this report. For example, Search for Common Ground's work in Mali focused on mentoring and training local CSOs to strengthen management and institutional sustainability, while International Alert's Nashiriki Kwa Masikilizano project in the DRC engaged young people directly in funding decisions and implementation, building ownership and long-term skills.<sup>51</sup> A European Commission funded project implemented by Search for Common Ground called Inuka!, focussing on supporting vulnerable youth to participate in community peace and security efforts in coastal Kenya, dramatically improved the capacity of one of the local partners, Kiunga Youth Bunge Initiative. The organisation went from "very small and informal at the beginning" to "a fully registered and praised CSO in Lamu."<sup>52</sup>

Similarly, programmes administered by the European Union Delegation to Côte d'Ivoire have placed a strong emphasis on building the financial sustainability of local CSOs. CSO capacity in Côte d'Ivoire remains constrained due to the legacy of protracted civil conflict between 2002 and 2011, persistent governance challenges, limited access to financial resources, and historically strained relations between the state and civil society.<sup>53</sup> As a result, many local

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<sup>50</sup> Email interview, 9<sup>th</sup> September 2025

<sup>51</sup> Hilditch, 'From Despair to Hope'.

<sup>52</sup> Obando Ekesa et al., Inuka! Supporting Vulnerable Youth to Participate in Community Peace and Security Efforts in Coastal Kenya—End of Project Evaluation (Search for Common Ground, 2021); Email interview, 9<sup>th</sup> September.

<sup>53</sup> Bertelsmann Transformation Index (BTI) 'BTI 2024 Côte d'Ivoire Country Report', BTI 2024, accessed 25 September 2025, <https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-report?isocode=CIV&cHash=893a2405e78ffbce5eac2fcf6ee21e52>.

CSOs are unlikely to meet standard EU compliance requirements or to have the financial capacity needed to absorb and manage an EU grant. In response, the EU prioritised funding approaches that focused explicitly on building CSO capacity. In one such programme, local organisations undertook diagnostic assessments of their institutional strengths and weaknesses and developed tailored action plans, supported by targeted training delivered through five regional civil society support centres.<sup>54</sup> Following a call for proposals, selected CSOs received **micro-grants alongside mentoring support** to implement their projects and **strengthen their organisational capacities**. In one of the peacebuilding projects funded by the EU, this approach was complemented by support for **income-generating activities**, for instance, supporting the construction of community centres that could then be rented out as an events space or for more traditional initiatives like community laundries. This approach contributed to the durability of these local cohesion mechanisms, which continued to operate long after the conclusion of the project.

### **Promoting equitable partnerships through EU guidance and funding requirements**

Several EU institutional services have developed guidance for INGOs to promote more equitable partnerships and improve information flows to local CSOs, strengthening their understanding of EU funding mechanisms. In 2023, DG ECHO launched **localisation guidance aimed at shifting EU and partner mindsets**, including a non-binding target for 25% of funding to reach local and national actors directly, through no more than one intermediary.<sup>55</sup> DG ECHO has also updated its single proposal form, used since the 2024 Humanitarian Implementation Plan, which **assumes local-level implementation as the default** and prioritises proposals that advance localisation. Partners that do not operate in this way are required to justify this in their submissions.

FPI has also sought to refine its requirements for INGOs in ways that promote equitable partnerships and ensure that interventions are firmly grounded in local contexts. For instance, in a recent call for proposals to build leadership capacity and linkages between youth in the Swahili coast, the call was structured to **prioritise local organisations as lead implementers**; in cases where an INGO served as the lead, the proposal was required to include a component focused on capacity building. FPI staff reported that this call seemed to create more open and equitable relationships, with INGOs and local CSOs working hand in hand to deliver projects.<sup>56</sup>

FPI have also **delivered training on EU funding processes** through their Regional Hubs. These sessions explain financial management requirements to local organisations and have, at times, revealed gaps in understanding – for example, some local CSOs were surprised by the overheads retained by INGOs. Providing such training is therefore an important step

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<sup>54</sup> Online interview, 19th September 2025

<sup>55</sup> European Commission, ed., Promoting Equitable Partnerships with Local Responders in Humanitarian Settings: DG ECHO Guidance Note (Publications Office, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.2795/653711>.

<sup>56</sup> Online interview, 2<sup>nd</sup> October 2025

toward more equitable partnerships, as it improves transparency and enables local CSOs to better understand funding structures and set informed expectations.<sup>57</sup>

### **Reducing administrative burden**

EU officials, alongside INGOs, have also explored ways to **reduce the administrative burden** on local partners. For instance, DG INTPA funded a 5-year financial framework agreement (with co-funding from the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency) to the United Network of Young Peacebuilders (UNOY), a global network of 136 youth-led peacebuilding organisations. This included funding for strategic planning, capacity development of member organisations, and joint advocacy. Part of the project was the **delivery of small grants to network members**. Almost 40% of the members in UNOY's network operate on less than €5,000 yearly, so they need the ability to access **funding with minimal administrative burden**. The team worked with the EU to minimise financial reporting; for instance, reducing it to the provision of expenditure, narrative reporting and project deliverables from sub-grantees.<sup>58</sup> Many reporting requirements were still asked of UNOY, but allowing these smaller, local organisations to access this funding with reduced burden had a huge impact. It allowed members to get seed funding, to undertake community dialogue projects, influence policy, engage in wellbeing activities, undertake research and develop fundraising training or strategies. In other areas – such as youth,<sup>59</sup> environment,<sup>60</sup> and Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values<sup>61</sup> programmes – the EU has used framework partnership agreements to establish long-term cooperation under general principles, which gives reliability of funding and the ability of organisations to adapt to emerging priorities.

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<sup>57</sup> Online interview, 23<sup>rd</sup> September 2025

<sup>58</sup> Online interview, 15<sup>th</sup> September 2025

<sup>59</sup> European Union, 'Civil Society Cooperation in the Field of Youth - FPA (2026-2027)', EU Funding & Tenders Portal, 16 May 2025, <https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/portal/screen/opportunities/topic-details/ERASMUS-YOUTH-2025-CSC-OG-FPA?isExactMatch=true&status=31094501,31094502,31094503&frameworkProgramme=43353764&order=DESC&pageNumber=1&pageSize=50&sortBy=startDate>.

<sup>60</sup> European Union, 'Fern 2025-2026 Workplan – Framework Partnership Agreement', EU Funding and Tenders Portal, 7 May 2025, <https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/portal/screen/opportunities/projects-details/43252405/101202976/LIFE2027?order=DESC&pageNumber=1&pageSize=50&sortBy=relevance&isExactMatch=true&keywords=framework%20partnership%20agreement>.

<sup>61</sup> European Union, 'Equinet Framework Partnership Agreement Proposal for 2022 to 2025', EU Funding & Tenders Portal, 3 May 2025, <https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/portal/screen/opportunities/projects-details/43251589/101069721/CERV?order=DESC&pageNumber=1&pageSize=50&sortBy=relevance&isExactMatch=true&keywords=framework%20partnership%20agreement>.

## ■ 5. Concentrating decision-making in crisis- and conflict-affected contexts

Decision-making authority is a critical, but often overlooked, factor in determining whether EU funding can respond effectively to locally led peacebuilding needs. When funding decisions are made closer to the implementation context, EU support is generally more responsive and better aligned with local realities. Examples of good practice consistently highlight the importance of competent and experienced officials who are appropriately empowered to exercise judgement within existing rules and procedures in support of peacebuilding objectives.

In many cases, success depends on **staff who can confidently navigate complex regulatory frameworks and apply them in ways that are context-sensitive**, while remaining fully compliant with EU requirements. Across almost all positive examples of flexible EU funding for local peacebuilding, interviewees identified knowledgeable and engaged staff within EU Delegations and FPI Regional Hubs as a decisive factor. INGOs frequently emphasised the value of having a **clear focal point** who could **explain regulatory boundaries and explore where flexibility was possible**. For example, UNOY highlighted the importance of an EU focal person who guided them through funding processes while working collaboratively to deliver for local partners within EU rules.<sup>62</sup> Similarly, Concordis described officials in the FPI Hub in Nairobi and the EUD in Bangui as “really reactive and responsive” and worked with them to deliver programming that met local needs.<sup>63</sup>

In discussions on aligning an intervention with the national Demobilisation, Disarmament, and Reintegration (DDR) strategy in the DRC, one interviewee from International Alert highlighted the value of “really meaningful and technical conversations” with EU focal points.<sup>64</sup> These exchanges focused in particular on sequencing activities and ensuring that DDR efforts also strengthened relationships between communities and security actors, so that both community members and ex-combatants felt safe to engage in demobilisation processes. This same interviewee was grateful for the challenging questions that EU officials had continued to ask over the course of the last decade of their time working in DRC, seeing **the EU Delegation as a resource**, with people who had worked on the context for a long time, who you could “bounce ideas off”, not just a donor.<sup>65</sup>

These outcomes “hinge on how a particular person interprets the rules, and the degree of discretion they feel able to apply in fluid contexts.”<sup>66</sup> However, **a more systematic approach to empowering in-country EU staff can have an even greater impact**. The Colombia Trust

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<sup>62</sup> Online interview, 15<sup>th</sup> September 2025

<sup>63</sup> Online interview, 6<sup>th</sup> September 2025

<sup>64</sup> Online interview, 10<sup>th</sup> September 2025

<sup>65</sup> Online interview, 10<sup>th</sup> September 2025

<sup>66</sup> Email interview, 11<sup>th</sup> September 2025

Fund illustrates the potential of such an approach: EU officials in Bogotá were not only provided with dedicated financial resources but were also granted genuine decision-making autonomy to identify and support initiatives that, in consultation with civil society and local community representatives, they assessed as most effective in advancing the peace agreement. The fund's broad and flexible parameters allowed activities to be adapted quickly in response to new information and changing conditions, rather than being rigidly predefined.<sup>67</sup> Crucially, most decisions were made in Colombia rather than Brussels, **enabling EU staff on the ground to respond quickly without being delayed by lengthy approval processes.** This **decentralised decision-making** created space for meaningful collaboration with local and national actors on determining priorities and designing interventions. With contributions from 21 EU member states and a budget of €127 million,<sup>68</sup> the fund financed projects ranging from community dialogue and rural development to ex-combatant reintegration and green jobs to support sustainable livelihoods. In contrast to other trust fund models that faced criticism for prioritising centralised objectives,<sup>69</sup> the Colombia Trust Fund has been widely regarded, by both EU officials and peacebuilding practitioners, as a successful example of how institutionalised flexibility and delegated authority can enhance peacebuilding impact.<sup>70</sup>

## Conclusions and recommendations

Evidence consistently shows that the most effective and cost-efficient responses to conflict emerge when local actors on the frontlines are empowered to lead peacebuilding efforts. This has been recognised by many individual EU officials, and they have continued to work towards improving the EU's approach. Unfortunately, the EU has still struggled to deliver **genuinely locally led peacebuilding at scale**, constrained by rigid budgetary procedures, complex compliance requirements, and limited institutional mechanisms to systematically empower local partners.

At the same time, the EU has demonstrated that that even within these constraints, it can deploy more flexible funding approaches that better support locally led peacebuilding. Across multiple instruments and contexts, EU services and Delegations have already demonstrated **promising practices that provide greater flexibility and shift decision-making closer to conflict-affected communities.** These examples highlight how flexibility has

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<sup>67</sup> Online interview, 10<sup>th</sup> May 2024

<sup>68</sup> Solveig Richter, The EU Trust Fund: Pushing for a Liberal Architecture or Local Empowerment in Colombia? (University of Leipzig), August 2022, <https://ecpr.eu/Events/Event/PaperDetails/65736>.

<sup>69</sup> David Kipp, 'From Exception to Rule – the EU Trust Fund for Africa', Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP), 18 December 2018, <https://www.swp-berlin.org/publikation/eu-trust-fund-for-africa>.

<sup>70</sup> Sophie Desmidt et al., 'Staying Engaged as Team Europe in Fragile Settings', *European Think Tanks Group*, 4 December 2024, <https://ettg.eu/team-europe-fragile-settings/>.

already been operationalised within EU instruments and show what can be learned from these experiences.

To ensure coherence across EU practice, future reforms should be guided by the paper's definition of 'good flexibility': funding approaches that combine reliable multi-year commitment with the ability to adapt in response to changing contexts; that can respond quickly to emerging crises or peace openings; and that is unrestricted where possible, enabling recipients to determine priorities based on local realities. Strengthening EU support to locally led peacebuilding therefore requires **institutionalising this type of flexibility across EU instruments**, rather than relying on isolated examples of good practice.

Building on the findings of this report, the EU should prioritise reforms in five areas:

## 1. Strengthening risk-tolerant and adaptive funding modalities

Programming in conflict-affected contexts is likely to have greater impact if it is adaptive. Rather than treating political shocks, violence escalation, or insecurity as exceptional 'force majeure' events that trigger suspension and closure, the EU should recognise that **volatility is a defining feature of fragile and conflict-affected environments** and design funding accordingly.

To strengthen EU flexibility in practice, the EU should:

- **Systematise adaptive grant design** by allowing broader framing of activities and results at project inception, ensuring implementing partners can shift approaches as contexts evolve without repeated contract renegotiations.
- **Streamline amendment procedures** for conflict-related programming, reducing the administrative burden of logframe revisions, budget reallocations, and no-cost extensions when circumstances change.
- **Increase space for calculated risk-taking**, recognising that innovative peacebuilding outcomes often require tolerance for uncertainty and experimentation.
- **Promote predictability alongside flexibility**, ensuring that adaptive programming does not come at the expense of sustained engagement and trust-based partnerships.

## 2. Strengthening pathways from short-term response to sustained peacebuilding support

The EU's rapid response mechanisms have demonstrated significant added value in enabling timely and flexible engagement. However, interviews consistently highlighted a structural weakness: interventions launched through short-term crisis response are rarely sustained through longer-term instruments, despite continued local need and demonstrated impact. This undermines continuity, weakens trust with local partners, and risks wasting investments made during initial stages of engagement.

To strengthen institutional pathways from rapid response to longer-term support, the EU should:

- **Create more transparent handover mechanisms** between rapid response funding and longer-term geographic programming, including early planning for handover and transition processes, and timely communication of decisions and rationale where longer-term funding will not be disbursed.
- **Strengthen coordination across EU services**, ensuring that relevant institutions and Delegations are engaged early enough to avoid discontinuity.
- **Reduce funding gaps between phases**, including through bridging arrangements or retroactive financing where necessary, to ensure continuity for staff, partners, and community processes.

## 3. Embedding participatory models in decision-making

Decision-making processes that enable local actors to shape priorities and resource allocation can strengthen relevance, improve conflict sensitivity, and increase accountability to affected populations. EU-funded initiatives have already demonstrated the added value of community-based governance structures, peer-led grant selection, and co-designed approaches with youth and marginalised groups. These practices should be expanded and more systematically encouraged across EU peacebuilding support.

To strengthen participatory approaches, the EU should:

- **Encourage grantees to develop participatory decision-making structures**, ensuring conflict-affected communities have meaningful influence over funding priorities and activity design.
- **Incentivise peer-review and community-led grant selection mechanisms**, particularly in small grant schemes, where local actors are best positioned to assess relevance and credibility.

- **Allow locally defined indicators and measurement approaches**, where possible, so that project success reflects community priorities rather than externally imposed frameworks.
- **Ensure participation goes beyond formal civil society**, including actors who are often excluded from donor processes, such as informal groups, women-led networks, youth movements, and traditional or religious community structures.

## 4. Transforming hierarchies through power-shifting sub-granting arrangements

For many conflict-affected communities, sub-granting remains the most realistic route to accessing EU resources, particularly where local organisations face barriers related to compliance requirements, administrative capacity, or legal registration. When designed well, sub-granting can extend EU reach while enabling local actors to build skills, strengthen credibility, and increase long-term sustainability. However, if poorly structured, it can reinforce dependency and preserve unequal relationships in which international intermediaries retain control over funding, decision-making, and visibility.

To ensure sub-granting contributes to genuine localisation and does not reproduce existing hierarchies, the EU should:

- **Prioritise direct funding wherever feasible**, and where this is not possible, require intermediary models that demonstrably increase local leadership and autonomy.
- **Set clearer expectations for intermediaries**, ensuring INGOs and other grant holders show how local partners participate in shaping strategies, not only implementing activities.
- **Strengthen transparency and accountability** in funding flows by requiring intermediaries to disclose overheads, cost structures, and the proportion of resources managed by local partners.
- **Adjust compliance and reporting obligations to match partner capacity**, reducing burdens for small local organisations through simplified reporting models or more proportionate financial requirements.
- **Link sub-granting to long-term institutional strengthening**, encouraging mentorship, accompaniment, and investment in organisational resilience that reflects the priorities identified by local partners themselves.

## 5. Concentrating decision-making in crisis- and conflict-affected contexts

The effectiveness of EU peacebuilding support is strongly shaped by where decisions are taken and how institutional authority is distributed. When key funding and programming decisions are concentrated far from conflict-affected settings, EU support can become slow, risk-averse, and insufficiently attuned to local dynamics. Conversely, when decision-making authority, resources, and analytical capacity are embedded closer to the context, EU interventions are better positioned to respond to evolving risks and opportunities, and to engage constructively with local peacebuilding actors.

To strengthen EU decision-making at country and regional level, the EU should:

- **Delegate greater decision-making authority to country-level actors**, ensuring Delegations and Regional Hubs have the mandate and resources to respond rapidly to emerging risks and opportunities.

## List of abbreviations

<b>CAR</b>	Central African Republic
<b>CSO</b>	Civil Society Organisation
<b>CSDN</b>	Civil Society Dialogue Network
<b>DDR</b>	Demobilisation, Disarmament and Reintegration
<b>DG ECHO</b>	Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations
<b>DG INTPA</b>	Directorate-General for International Partnerships
<b>DRC</b>	Democratic Republic of the Congo
<b>EC</b>	European Commission
<b>EED</b>	European Endowment for Democracy
<b>EEAS</b>	European External Action Service
<b>EPLO</b>	European Peacebuilding Liaison Office
<b>EU</b>	European Union
<b>EUD</b>	EU Delegation
<b>FPI</b>	Service for Foreign Policy Instruments
<b>INGO</b>	International Non-Governmental Organisation
<b>MIP</b>	Multiannual Indicative Programme
<b>NDICI-GE</b>	Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument – Global Europe
<b>PMC</b>	Programme Monitoring Committee
<b>UN</b>	United Nations
<b>UNOY</b>	United Network of Young Peacebuilders