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Climate, Peace and Security: Entry points for EU engagement in complex partnership contexts - Perspectives on the Sahel

CSDN Meeting Report

European Peacebuilding Liaison Office

June 2026

European Peacebuilding Liaison Office (EPLO)

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Background

On 3 June, the European Peacebuilding Liaison Office (EPLO), in cooperation with the European External Action Service (EEAS), the European Commission's (EC) Service for Foreign Policy Instruments (FPI) and the EU Special Representative for the Sahel, organised an online Civil Society Dialogue Network (CSDN) Geographic Meeting.

This CSDN meeting was convened in the context of the EU's efforts to strengthen the coherence between its climate adaptation, peace and security priorities as part of its external action and international partnerships. The overall aim was to unlock concrete recommendations that would lead the EU to more effectively use climate, peace, and security programming as a platform for engagement in contexts where formal diplomatic and partnership frameworks are limited or disrupted, as well as to inform the implementation of the Joint Communication on the Climate-Security Nexus.

The discussion drew on lessons learned from the Sahel region to examine what has worked at the programming level, where gaps remain, and what the EU's political and institutional added value can be in supporting these approaches.

The discussion explored both conceptual questions relating to Climate, Peace and Security (CPS) approaches and their application in the Sahel. Participants reflected on the opportunities and limitations of using climate and environmental issues as entry points for engagement in politically constrained contexts, before turning to the specific political, security and operational realities shaping CPS efforts in the Sahel.

This CSDN event was the first of a series of online CSDN Geographic Meetings on the CPS nexus in complex partnership environments.

The CSDN meeting was held under Chatham House Rules and gathered 29 participants from peacebuilding civil society organisations (CSOs), as well as representatives of the EU institutions. No attempt was made to reach consensus on the issues discussed. The report reflects the range of views shared during the exchange. The following sections gather key observations and recommendations from the discussions.

Climate-Peace-Security in complex partnership settings

Conceptual reflections on climate and environment issues as entry points: opportunities and limitations

Participants reflected on the role of climate and environmental issues as potential entry points for dialogue, cooperation and engagement in fragile and conflict-affected settings (FCAS). While environmental issues remain relatively marginal in formal peace processes, participants noted that challenges such as **water scarcity, land degradation,**

natural resource management and pollution are directly experienced by communities and can therefore create **practical opportunities for dialogue** where other forms of engagement may be politically difficult.

Several participants highlighted that **climate and environmental issues can help bring together local communities, and local and national authorities around shared concerns**. When considering local power dynamics and realities, these approaches can serve as confidence-building measures, strengthening relations between communities and state institutions, foster social cohesion and support cooperation across different groups.

At the same time, participants emphasised that **climate and environmental issues should not be viewed solely as technical entry points**. For many communities, these issues are closely linked to livelihoods, mobility and displacement, survival and local grievances. Participants therefore cautioned against approaches that treat climate as a means to reach other objectives while overlooking the structural governance and conflict issues that shape everyday realities in FCAS. Sustainable peace requires addressing underlying grievances, exclusion and governance challenges alongside environmental pressures.

Analytical clarity and risks of instrumentalisation

Participants stressed the importance of analytical clarity in the application of CPS approaches. Questions were raised regarding **who** climate-sensitive interventions are intended to engage, **what** objectives they seek to achieve, and **how** they contribute to broader peacebuilding and governance outcomes.

While climate and environmental issues may create politically feasible spaces for dialogue, participants cautioned against assuming that they are politically neutral. They highlighted the risk that **climate agendas may be instrumentalised** either by external actors seeking to maintain political engagement or by national actors seeking to divert attention from other drivers of conflict. **When climate programming from international donors is perceived as politically motivated**, e.g. when centring displacement, that has created backlashes from local and national authorities. Participants warned that environmental and climate initiatives can also be appropriated by authorities as **such initiatives may coexist with continued restrictions on civil rights.** Efforts to adapt to climate and environmental risks should also not obscure governance failures such as exclusion, weak accountability mechanisms or other root causes of instability. Donors need to maintain attention to broader governance and rights-related concerns.

Participants therefore emphasised that **CPS approaches should remain conflict-sensitive, inclusive and based on the realities of the communities they serve**. Environmental cooperation can support trust-building and engagement, but only when linked to broader efforts to strengthen governance, inclusion and resilience. Participants stressed the importance of adhering to the **principle of "do no harm"** and ensuring that interventions are **informed by conflict analysis assessments**. It was also mentioned that CPS data and analysis should be co-produced by local CSOs.

Implications and lessons from the Sahel

Climate change, governance and conflict dynamics

Participants stressed that **climate and environmental pressures are deeply intertwined with governance and security challenges across the Sahel**. Climate change affects access to shared natural resources, including water, grazing land and agricultural resources, with significant implications for livelihoods, mobility, displacement and local stability. Participants repeatedly emphasised that climate pressures cannot be understood in isolation from broader political, governance and security dynamics.

A recurring observation was that **conflicts over natural resources are often more about governance than resource scarcity itself**. Weak institutions, limited accountability, exclusion and declining trust between citizens and authorities frequently shape how environmental pressures are experienced and managed. Several participants argued that the central challenge is often not scarcity alone, but the governance arrangements through which resources are accessed, managed and distributed.

Participants also mentioned that trust-building should not only be understood between citizens and state institutions but also **within and between Sahelian communities**. The suspension of numerous partnerships following recent political changes was described as having weakened existing dialogue and collaboration networks.

Participants also noted that **climate and environmental issues have become increasingly political in the region** and are often a driver of conflict themselves. Security and environmental risks are often overlapping, especially around natural resources. For example, security-induced displacement can lead to more people gathering on smaller pieces of land to feed livestock, engage in agricultural activities and find adequate land for their livelihoods which can add demographic pressure in addition to already scarce water and land. In some cases, militias and armed groups may also revert to violence to drive nomadic herders off strategic lands. However, discussions around **adaptation, natural resource governance and land management, water management, and climate often remain among the few areas where cooperation is still possible**. In some cases, communities and local authorities have continued to engage around environmental challenges even when broader political dialogue has become constrained.

Ownership, sovereignty, locally-led approaches and building on national frameworks

The importance of ownership emerged as one of the strongest themes throughout the discussion. Participants consistently emphasised that interventions are most effective when they are **rooted in local realities and aligned with community and national priorities**.

CSOs should be key actors in contextual analysis, programme design and implementation. Participants stressed that **local CSOs should be involved from the outset** and should play a central role in shaping interventions rather than being treated solely as implementing partners. Local ownership was seen as essential to ensuring legitimacy, sustainability and responsiveness to community needs.

Participants also stressed that environmental management and natural resource use are closely linked to livelihoods. In many communities, households depend on activities such as wood collection for cooking and income generation. As a result, **interventions that are not locally owned and designed with local economic realities in mind may unintentionally affect livelihoods and face resistance**.

Participants also highlighted the importance of engaging local and national authorities. Several noted that even in politically constrained environments or amidst ongoing violent conflicts, **local authorities often remain open to engagement when initiatives respond to concrete community priorities**. Experiences from the region suggested that authorities frequently view climate adaptation, natural resource management and livelihood concerns as legitimate governance issues that require practical responses.

The discussion further emphasised the **importance of sovereignty**. Participants noted that sovereignty should be understood as a factor that directly influences legitimacy and the effectiveness of external engagement. It was noted that in countries such as Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, external funding is at times perceived as working against state priorities. Participants therefore stressed the importance of demonstrating how support to civil society and local initiatives contributes to nationally identified priorities and complements the role of the state. **Interventions that align with nationally defined priorities and build on existing national initiatives** were considered more likely to achieve sustainable results. Participants noted that **national understandings of sovereignty are often closely linked to specific sectoral priorities.** Niger was cited as an example where food sovereignty has become a political objective approached through investments in agroecology, irrigation and domestic rice production. External donors may achieve more impactful results when approaches are aligned with such nationally defined priorities.

Participants also stressed that **greater transparency regarding objectives, funding and partnerships**, including clearly communicating how interventions contribute to local and nationally defined priorities, can help address perceptions that external donors are operating in opposition to national authorities. **Supporting the credibility, transparency and accountability of CSOs in the Sahel** was seen as an important way of strengthening a responsibility-oriented approach to enhance trust among communities and authorities.

Several participants argued that the EU should place greater emphasis on **building on existing national policies and frameworks** rather than developing additional frameworks. Reference was made to emerging climate-security strategies and policy frameworks in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger. A number of those strategies include human security, social development and governance as components. Participants suggested that these

frameworks offer **opportunities for international partners to support implementation** while strengthening nationally-owned approaches.

Natural resource governance as a platform for engagement

Participants shared a number of examples demonstrating how natural resource governance can support dialogue and cooperation across different levels.

Cross-border transhumance was repeatedly cited as an important example. **Negotiations around grazing rights, livestock movements, mixed patrols, taxation of livestock, routes of herders, access to services, resources and security arrangements have created opportunities for cooperation** between communities, local authorities and neighbouring states. Participants highlighted examples of local peace agreements that regulated transhumance routes, strengthened accountability, linked local concerns with national and regional policy frameworks, and as such also created opportunities for revenue collection.

Environmental and natural resource management initiatives were highlighted as practical opportunities for engagement. Examples included dialogues around water access, shared resource management and environmental protection measures. One participant noted that environmental pressures are often experienced directly by communities and can therefore provide an accessible starting point for dialogue and cooperation.

Participants also pointed to examples where **environmental programming strengthened relationships between communities and national authorities**. Training programmes for forest officers, for example, not only strengthened institutional capacities but also created opportunities for dialogue between communities and public authorities around the management of shared natural resources.

Simultaneously, participants mentioned persistent **challenges in scaling successful local initiatives to national and regional levels**. Translating such agreements into broader policy frameworks and ensuring effective implementation remain significant obstacles.

Framing and engagement in politically constrained environments

A significant part of the discussion focused on the importance of framing and communication in politically sensitive contexts.

Participants stressed that **authorities should not automatically be perceived as unwilling to engage**. Rather, successful engagement often depends on how issues are presented and whether they are perceived as **responding to national and community priorities**.

Participants noted that discussions framed around livelihoods, social cohesion, natural resource management or climate adaptation can create greater space for engagement than activities explicitly framed as peacebuilding, mediation or conflict resolution.

Examples from the region illustrated how **terminology and framing may need to be adapted to the rapidly changing political realities**. Participants highlighted situations in which social cohesion proved a more acceptable framing than dialogue or mediation, or where livelihood and resource management discussions created opportunities to address underlying conflict dynamics that would otherwise be difficult to discuss openly.

Participants also noted that **framing initiatives around shared challenges and tangible common interests** can help create opportunities for engagement and cooperation even in politically sensitive environments. Climate adaptation, livelihood opportunities, rehabilitation, energy, public services and employment were cited as examples of issues that may bring together actors across conflict divides around practical concerns.

However, participants also **warned against using climate narratives as a means of avoiding difficult political conversations**. Climate-related challenges should not become a substitute for addressing governance failures, exclusion, shrinking civic space or other structural drivers of conflict. Once conversations over environmental issues or natural resources are established, diplomatic efforts will be required to tackle additional questions related to other conflict drivers. **Only when all dimensions of the conflict are addressed, can more sustainable long-term solutions be achieved**. This includes women's leadership, gender equality, civic rights and freedoms and Youth, Peace and Security (YPS) considerations, e.g. youth employment. These human dimensions remain central to sustainable peace, particularly given the interconnected impacts of climate change, mobility, livelihoods and social cohesion.

Regional and cross-border dimensions

Participants repeatedly highlighted the **regional and transboundary nature of climate, security and governance challenges in the Sahel**. Shared natural resources, transhumance routes, river basins, displacement and insecurity frequently extend beyond national borders, requiring regional responses and cooperation mechanisms. The Niger River basin, which extends across several countries, was cited as an example of a shared resource whose management has implications for livelihoods, stability and security across borders. It was also noted that the **Sahel should be understood as part of a broader regional system**, with dynamics increasingly linked to neighbouring coastal states and the Gulf of Guinea.

Several participants highlighted examples of **cross-border agreements that supported cooperation around transhumance, security arrangements and natural resource management**. Such agreements were described as valuable because they connect local realities with national legislation and regional frameworks and also create opportunities for affected communities to directly participate in decision-making processes.

Participants also reflected on the **changing regional landscape following the creation of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES)**. While relations between AES countries and some traditional regional mechanisms have become more complex, participants noted that cooperation on climate, natural resource management and security-related challenges remains both necessary and possible. The **AES countries continue to face common challenges**, including climate pressures, insecurity, pastoralism, land governance issues and demographic change, which creates opportunities for continued technical dialogue and exchanges of good practice. Participants also pointed to the **role of neighbouring countries**, including Ghana, Guinea and Togo, in supporting efforts to maintain dialogue and engagement between ECOWAS and AES member states.

The discussion also highlighted the **importance of regional institutions and frameworks**. Participants noted that African institutions, including ECOWAS and the African Union (AU), have developed relevant normative and policy frameworks that remain underutilised.

Several participants argued that **regional-level dialogue may continue to offer opportunities for engagement even where national-level political dialogue becomes more constrained**. Technical cooperation around shared environmental challenges was viewed as one potential avenue for maintaining communication and cooperation across borders. However, it was also noted that channelling EU's regional engagement solely through Abidjan could create barriers to engagement with AES countries given the current political tensions between Côte d'Ivoire and AES members.

Dialogue, coordination and convening

Participants highlighted **the role the EU can play in convening dialogue across different levels and stakeholder groups in the Sahel.** Several stressed the value of creating and sustaining spaces for exchange between local CSOs and EU policymakers for local experiences and analysis to inform policy discussions and programming decisions. Participants also noted the potential **role of EU Delegations (EUDs)** in facilitating stronger links between local CSOs and EU policy processes. Greater clarity regarding roles and responsibilities across EUDs and headquarters was considered important.

Participants further called for **stronger coordination within the EU system and a stronger exchange with international and African donors.** Participants emphasised that the EU's convening power could be used more strategically to promote coordination on CPS, reduce duplication and build on existing initiatives and expertise.

Joint assessment processes, including UN-EU-World Bank Post-Disaster Needs Assessments (PDNAs) and Recovery and Peacebuilding Assessments (RPBAs), were considered potential entry points for CPS approaches. Greater involvement of local CSOs in such assessments was encouraged.

Operational constraints, funding and programming implications

Participants identified several operational challenges for CPS engagement in the region.

Participants stressed that **one-size-fits-all approaches are inappropriate in the Sahel**. They cautioned against treating AES and other Sahel countries as a homogeneous group and emphasised the importance of context-specific analysis to identify different risks, opportunities and entry points across countries and localities.

Shrinking civic space, political sensitivities and security risks resulting from banditry, terrorism and armed violence were described as significant constraints for local CSOs. Participants noted that CSOs working in remote and rural areas often face extremely heightened risks of violence, risks of safety and security, for example around land use, and may find themselves caught between state authorities and armed actors. The need for **greater mental health and psychosocial support** for practitioners operating in stressful and insecure environments was also highlighted. In some contexts, environmental CSOs were described to be less targeted by civic space restrictions and may be able to work indirectly on peace-related activities through technical issues.

Many participants called for a **stronger integration across humanitarian, development, peacebuilding (HDP), environmental and governance interventions** to avoid working in siloes. While governance reform, climate adaptation and peacebuilding require long-term engagement, communities are often confronted with urgent livelihood, food security and protection challenges. Protection gaps have become particularly acute following the withdrawal or downsizing of peacekeeping missions, leaving communities with fewer mechanisms for civilian protection and conflict prevention. **Existing programming was described as insufficiently flexible to respond to both immediate shocks and needs and longer-term structural challenges.** Successful programming also includes **support to early and anticipatory action**, e.g. through supporting cross-sectoral analyses that integrate security data, agroclimatic forecasts, weather forecasts and conflict early warning mechanisms.

Participants highlighted the need for **greater conflict sensitivity in technical climate adaptation and infrastructure projects** implemented in FCAS, including those supported through Global Gateway. Sectors such as water management, agriculture, renewable energy and infrastructure development may provide important entry points for engagement and often align closely with the priorities of Sahelian governments.

Participants further highlighted the importance of **partnerships between peacebuilding, governance and technical actors,** e.g. through consortia, noting that no single organisation can be expected to cover all dimensions of CPS programming. Observations included that current funding structures do not sufficiently provide resources to combine these approaches with more substantive technical interventions, which are often more expensive.

Funding modalities were also discussed throughout the event. Participants argued that climate resilience, peacebuilding and governance change cannot be achieved through short project cycles alone. **More flexible, multi-year funding arrangements and programme design** with a higher inbuilt tolerance for risk were considered necessary to support adaptation to volatile contexts and sustain partnerships over time. Participants argued that this requires a greater **willingness to work over longer time horizons without expecting immediate or easily measurable outcomes**.

Particular emphasis was placed on **improving access to funding for local and rural CSOs** that are often closest to communities most affected by climate and environmental change but may face greater administrative and financial barriers to accessing funding. Local representation also may take different forms in different contexts, including traditional leadership structures.

Participants emphasised that improving access to funding should go beyond simplifying grant procedures. The **value of subgranting mechanisms and microgrants** as a means of reaching smaller local CSOs was highlighted. Localisation efforts should include **dedicated resources for organisational development, administrative and financial management, compliance with national legislation, and other forms of organisational capacity-building**. Direct **institutional support,** also for overhead costs, was considered crucial for strengthening local CSOs' long-term sustainability and reducing the burden created by repeated cycles of project development, fundraising and reporting.

Participants further noted that **changing political environments have affected the composition of civil society itself**, with new organisations emerging in some contexts that maintain closer relationships with state institutions. These developments were seen as raising important questions for international donors regarding partnership choices.

The discussion also touched upon the need to explore **more innovative financing models** for CPS-related programming, including partnerships with financial institutions, development banks and private sector actors. Climate finance mechanisms could also be used more strategically to support resilience, livelihoods and locally-led development.

Future dialogue and learning priorities

Participants identified several areas for future dialogue and learning, in particular the need to explore in greater depth the **relationship between CPS approaches, sovereignty, ownership, legitimacy, local governance, state-citizen relations and institutional trust**, to strengthen the sustainability and effectiveness of interventions in the Sahel.

Participants highlighted the need to better understand **how locally-led approaches can be translated into broader policy and programming frameworks**, including through stronger engagement with local governance institutions and national policy processes. **Reducing fragmentation between and within funding streams, interventions and policy frameworks** was identified as important for future reflection.

Participants suggested establishing **more regular opportunities for exchange between local peacebuilding CSOs in the Sahel and EU policymakers**. Such dialogue could help ensure that lessons emerging from field experience are more systematically reflected in strategic discussions, policy development and programme design.

The discussants also reflected on the **role of CSOs** themselves. It was noted that CSOs operating inside some countries may face limitations in speaking publicly on sensitive issues and that **mutual support, networks and solidarity between CSOs are important.**

Recommendations for EU engagement:

1. **Political engagement**
   - Build on existing national and regional initiatives and priorities, including existing CPS frameworks.
   - Recognise and support national ownership while maintaining engagement with local communities and civil society actors.
   - Use climate and environmental cooperation as opportunities for dialogue while avoiding the instrumentalisation of these issues or the neglect of broader governance and rights-related concerns.
   - Maintain a focus on the human dimensions of environmental and security risks, including gender equality, youth participation and livelihoods.

2. **Programming**
   - Design interventions that integrate climate adaptation, peacebuilding, governance, livelihood and social cohesion objectives.
   - Ensure that programmes are conflict-sensitive, context-specific and informed by conflict analysis.
   - Support initiatives that strengthen trust between communities and local, regional and national authorities and reinforce state-citizen relations.

3. **Funding and partnerships**
   - Provide longer-term, flexible funding that can react to pressing emergencies but also reflects the timescales required for peacebuilding, governance reform and climate resilience.
   - Reduce administrative barriers to funding for local CSOs through institutional capacity-building, subgranting mechanisms and institutional support.
   - Involve local CSOs throughout analysis, design, implementation and monitoring processes.
   - Support partnerships between technical, climate, governance and peacebuilding actors and across the HDP nexus.

4. **Regional cooperation**
   - Support cross-border and regional approaches to address shared resources, climate adaptation, governance and security challenges.
   - Strengthen engagement with existing African regional frameworks and institutions.
   - Convene dialogue between local CSOs, national authorities, regional organisations and international partners.
   - Promote exchanges of lessons learned and good practices across countries facing similar challenges.

Annex I: List of abbreviations

AES	Alliance of Sahel States
AU	African Union
CPS	Climate, Peace and Security
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
CSDN	Civil Society Dialogue Network
EC	European Commission
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
EEAS	European External Action Service
EU	European Union
EUD	EU Delegation
FPI	Service for Foreign Policy Instruments
HDP	Humanitarian-Development-Peace
JC	Joint Communication
RPBAs	Recovery and Peacebuilding Assessments
PDNAs	Post-Disaster Needs Assessments
UN	United Nations
YPS	Youth, Peace and Security