Search for Common Ground

(Dis-)integrating peace:

HOW CAN THE EU BETTER ENGAGE IN CONFLICT AFFECTED STATES?

BACKGROUND, CONTEXT & CHALLENGES

On 24 April 2025, policymakers, practitioners and researchers gathered in Brussels to co-develop proposals for a more effective European Union (EU) approach in support of stability, peace, and prosperity in conflict-affected partner countries. The event was co-organised by Search for Common Ground **and the** European Think Tanks Group, and co-financed by the Belgian Development Cooperation and Humanitarian Aid Department and the Dutch Department for Stabilisation and Humanitarian Aid. The discussions took place at a time when European policy makers are discussing the building blocks of the next EU Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), in a context of renewed violent conflicts around the world and shifting EU foreign policy priorities. Drawing on first-hand insights from practitioners and researchers in Afghanistan, Burkina Faso, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Mali, discussions explored key challenges, potential for conflict transformation, opportunities and recommendations to lay the ground for an optimised EU approach in fragile and conflict-affected states.

Participants mentioned the following **key challenges**:

- **The EU has built a strong framework of policies and approaches to peace, but implementation is hampered** by fragmented responsibilities and an overemphasis on shorter term, high visibility actions. This 'crisis mindset' can overshadow the deeper contextual analysis and longer term engagement that is crucial to tackle structural factors and for achieving sustainable solutions. The forthcoming new approach to fragility, if it can bridge sectors (humanitarian, development and peacebuilding), is expected/hoped to balance some of these limitations.
- **The current approach towards conflict-affected states tends to be top-down** and primarily focused on elites, rather than addressing root causes of conflict and supporting sustainable peace and prevention. There are limited partnerships, or even dialogues with varying types of local actors and organisations, and procedures are not sufficiently adapted for local ownership of EU-supported interventions. More generally, there is a lack of conflict sensitivity across EU external policies (including trade, climate, security); however, there are ongoing efforts internally to promote conflict-sensitivity as well as conflict assessment screenings.
- **The EU would benefit from an overarching, concrete, clearly communicated and impact-focused vision for what it wants to achieve in a given country or region, beyond its various tools and policies.** Internally, long term peacebuilding does not have a clear 'owner', with various understaffed units covering a wide range of issues, and no dedicated Council or Parliament committee to discuss the breadth of issues related to conflict and peace.
- The EU remains justifiably proud of its origins as a peace project, but is having to contend with new geopolitical realities that challenge this identity. The new sense of urgency on defense has strengthened narratives that present a **dichotomy of either a "bullets- and- bandaid" approach, or a private-sector-investment focus** on slightly more stable contexts (e.g. Global Gateway). **This risks**

leaving conflict prevention, addressing root causes of conflict and resilience building in conflict affected states aside.

- **The amount of funding for peacebuilding is at the lowest level in 15 years** and getting cut further. Yet cutting ODA in general or the tiny percentages of funding for peace efforts (e.g. 1% at EU level) to make up for budget deficits for defense is unlikely to yield the desired results. Not only is the value for money of conflict prevention much higher than investing in defense, it also reduces threats that cannot be dealt with militarily. Similarly, the cost of not doing something is often not considered.

PRIORITY AREAS FOR ACTION: LESSONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The framework: Adopt a coherent approach to conflict and fragility that supports inclusive, locally led peace efforts, moving from crisis response to long-term conflict transformation, using the EU's full institutional and political capacity

- **Invest in a strategic, comprehensive conflict transformation response.** Fragility and its root causes are diverse. Crises that last 15 years should stop being seen as a crisis, but as a reality needing resolution. This requires tackling root causes of conflict such as injustice, exclusion, poor governance, and socioeconomic inequality. Hence any type of fragility strategy will have to be adaptable to context and allow for differentiated responses, putting people and human dignity at the heart of action. After all, what really matters for peace will differ from one place to the next and should be defined by communities in conflict-affected contexts themselves.
- **Strengthen dialogue, listening and trust-building** with a variety of actors, including youth organisations, women organisations and religious actors as well as national authorities and regional organizations. Local ownership and alignment remains essential to implement not just at the level of partner governments but also with civil society organisations in partner countries and beyond elites in capitals. Such approaches are key to ensuring the EU's approach is a peace enabler, adapted to each country's distinct reality.
- **Apply a conflict sensitive approach in all EU external action policies, including in security and defence, investments under Global Gateway, trade relations or climate action and the green transition.** Such a conflict sensitive approach should be applied systematically to understand the context and to inform design and adaptation of programming, monitoring, as well as evaluation processes, mitigating unintended negative impacts on fragile contexts. The EU has existing expertise in-house that can be built on to achieve this.
- **Support inclusive peace processes:** Peace is not just the absence of conflict. Countries experiencing armed conflict need support to get to a truly sustainable peace process, which addresses the root causes of lingering conflicts and improves social cohesion and durable peace, going beyond negotiations between military actors or political elites. Oftentimes, religious and community leaders are seen by local populations as more legitimate peace brokers to start a national process than the state-led counterparts with whom international actors primarily engage.
- **Ensure stronger coordination and complementarity and apply the diversity of the EU toolbox to the EU's advantage, in response to context-specific challenges.** The EU has a lot of well-rounded policies and a comprehensive toolbox to deal with conflict contexts, including diplomacy, a large and indispensable network of EU delegations, mediation, financial means and leverage to deploy long term cooperation and rapid response interventions, technical expertise, civilian and military missions, all of which can be leveraged to help resolve a conflict. There is also a plethora of EU institutions and departments in 27 member states dealing with the EU's response to conflict, leading to a lot of

horizontal work in siloes and diluting impact**.** Having an overall view on what the impact is that the EU is seeking in a certain country or region, based on a common analysis (shared openly among Team Europe), would enable the EU to make better use of various tools' complementarity, ensuring horizontal policy coherence. Given the cross-cutting nature of peace and fragility, stronger, inter-disciplinary coordination inside EU institutions is needed. In terms of vertical coherence, while diversity among 27 member states is sometimes seen as a weakness, it can also be a resource: with shared long term objectives, member states can focus on their respective strengths and different risk appetites to pilot different tactics simultaneously.

- **Ensure early warning leads to early action, in support of local efforts, financially and politically**. Civil society and researchers regularly raise the alarm over dangerous local level shifts that predict upcoming violence; however, these early warnings rarely receive sufficient attention until the violent conflict spirals to the point that international media takes note. By then, many opportunities to prevent escalation have been lost, and the price of intervention has risen beyond what prevention would have cost. While there are important and well functioning EU funding mechanisms that are able to react to early warnings - in particular the rapid response pillar - this needs to be scaled up and be accompanied by a consistent political early response.
- **Prioritise genuine, participatory local partnerships** over purely transactional relationships or turning people in conflict affected states into pawns of geopolitical power struggles. Support local solutions and civil society's leadership in fragile contexts, including through risk-sharing and de-risking mechanisms. Also inside the EU civic space in policymaking is increasingly at risk, and should be protected by ensuring meaningful consultation and expert input before decisions are made and policies are finalised.
- **Improve Strategic Communication** to communicate the EU's offer clearly and effectively to both European citizens and local communities, without getting lost in jargon and grand strategies. Beyond institutions, the peacebuilding sector as a whole needs to communicate more professionally, showcasing its decades-long knowledge on what works and what does not to achieve enduring peace.

2. The people: Stay present and increase accountability from within, via genuine local partnerships

- **Stay politically present**: the EU maintaining a diplomatic address enables dialogue and helps de-politicise NGO operations. A lot of conflict-affected contexts are characterised by a low level of civilian participation, even when there are elections. With very high humanitarian needs, popular support and by extension legitimacy is gained by taking responsibility for a community's needs. Power also often comes with weapons, but that is not equal to legitimacy or popular support. If a coup leads to isolation, disengagement and massive cuts of funding by the international community, populations in those countries experience this shift as their needs, human dignity and wellbeing being ignored, affecting the perception of and trust in international actors. This in turn leads to feelings of abandonment that are easily exploited by other parties, especially when deliberately fed with disinformation. Engaging does not mean agreeing: it implies seeking to understand, building trust and finding entry points to reduce violent conflict and sustainably improve the population's situation. Moreover, the costs of not engaging should also be considered - failure to act means not only losing potential positive impact, but also affects the EU's soft power, now and in the future. NGOs also suffer the consequences of these decisions: perceived by local authorities as the connection with the international community, their programmes are impacted by suspensions, increased insecurity and increased control measures. It is therefore important for the EU and its member states to maintain a

presence and find entry points with the government or military , neither of which will be a monolithic block.

- **Support building accountability from within:** In a long-standing crisis worsened by authoritarian rule and partner withdrawals, youth and women's organizations drive resilience efforts. However, civic restrictions and securitization are harming long-term peace prospects. Increasing (authoritarian) authorities' accountability needs to start from within, by cleverly supporting civil society groups to both deliver services and increase social cohesion. This can look like setting up dialogues to reduce the appeal of joining extremist groups, or by rebuilding civil society movements to hold authorities at all levels accountable, step-by-step, with hundreds of daily micro-negotiations to navigate restrictions. Hence it is crucial to allow for NGO engagement with authorities, to build trust and, in the longer term, peace and good governance.
- **Support genuine local partnerships to increase impact and engage NGOs as official operational partners**. Rather than treating local organisations purely as implementers of EU projects, they should be recognised as architects of their own futures, and local leaders as experts capable of informing EU strategies in their context. Listening and supporting community-driven initiatives in this way is the real meaning of expressions such as "African solutions to African problems".
- **Deliver design, implementation and evaluation of programmes in collaboration with communities**, taking into account their priorities and expectations, and integrating social cohesion in the design. For example, use the first phase of a project to build out relations and organise discussions on what the needs are, and only in the second phase put in place the needed infrastructure, fostering collaboration across dividing lines. This can also include bridging communities with their diaspora communities for peace.
- **Support a healthy information space**, which is relevant both for social cohesion in communities and for the EU's reputation in third countries. Supporting media literacy and factchecking is one element in this regard, but beyond that the EU should also work with tech companies to rethink their business model that facilitates disinformation, addressing root causes of online polarisation.

3. The funding: Ensure long-term funding that is flexible to adapt to conflict dynamics, and monitor the impact

- **Maintain features, modalities and 93% DAC-ability of the current NDICI (Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument):** The potential merger of all EU external action instruments in the post-2027 EU Multi-Annual Financial Framework (MFF) is risky, even if the humanitarian instrument and budget line remain separate. The Regulation and procedures of the current NDICI are fit for purpose, *if* the political will is there to use the different pillars and procedures to ensure flexibility in the way they were originally intended, with geographic programmes, thematic ones, a rapid response pillar and a cushion.
- Maintain **non-humanitarian funding for fragile and conflict-affected countries**. With a clearer vision of what the EU wants to achieve, complementarity of strategies and programmes can be improved-ensuring impact beyond election cycles and budget years. Funding for triple nexus work by civil society organisations needs to be increased, avoiding silos and zoning restrictions that hamper locally designed efforts.
- **Increase funding for peace in the next MFF**, either via the thematic pillar, ringfencing or a target. In addition, peace needs to be mainstreamed across the NDICI's portfolio. There is a large under-utilised potential for it in the geographic pillars, as the mid-term review of the NDICI indicated.

- **Prioritise funding based on communities' priority needs**: in the case that funding to certain countries is cut and difficult decisions on priorities need to be made, ensure the communities' priorities are the guiding principle behind decision making, increasing impact on the areas that matter to them most.
- **Balance predictability and flexibility by ensuring there is long-term funding that can be flexible to adapt to changing conflict dynamics, and monitor the impact:** Funding mechanisms must provide for long term engagement to address root causes while remaining flexible enough to allow adaptation to evolving conflict contexts. If a change in context (e.g. a coup) calls for a rethink, adapt modalities and partners rather than reallocating the budget to another country. Such flexibility and the ability to work directly with CSOs and communities should be built in from the start; in this, the EU has existing good practices it could replicate.
- **Keep the ability to react to urgent new conflict situations via the rapid response pillar and the cushion.** Further discussion is required on how to make sure that successful risk-taking pilots, innovative approaches or rapid responses can be followed up by longer term funding with more impact when their seed funding or short term 18-months funding runs out. Possible options include keeping a global pot of funding, or keeping part of the geographic funding at country level unprogrammed, but for use within that country; another, arguably harder to achieve option could be new Trust Funds.
- **Design peace funding with appropriate measures of success and adapted procedures for conflict affected contexts**. What success in peacebuilding looks like and which indicators can be used to measure success must be decided with the affected populations. Funding procedures also need to be adapted for implementation in conflict-affected contexts - for example, tendering is not a problem in a stable capital but becomes a huge hurdle in a remote rural area with active fighting. Additionally, ratios should be different for peacebuilding than development cooperation: peacebuilding does not require big purchases for infrastructure; instead, the biggest cost are salaries for the local peacebuilders doing the work.
- **More funding, and particularly quality funding, should go directly to local NGOs**. While milestones should be agreed to achieve this goal in the future, in the interim period, **intermediaries** (whether other NGOs, development agencies or existing mechanisms such as UN pooled funds), **should be held accountable for genuine engagement** with local actors, rather than box ticking exercises. Practically speaking, this requires risk-sharing and de-risking mechanisms by the EU, and rethinking due diligence mechanisms to allow partnerships with local NGOs.

CONCLUSION

The post-Cold War international order is shifting. Power politics are back, and the EU risks losing its credibility if it fails to act consistently with its values. Conflict prevention, peacebuilding and human dignity must be central to its future strategy — not just rhetorically, but through concrete actions, funding, and partnerships. The EU will be judged by what it does, not what it says in a strategy. This requires the political will to step up. A **Europe that embraces its role as a peace actor**, listens to local needs, invests in long-term prevention, and works horizontally and coherently across sectors, will be more effective and legitimate — both abroad and at home.

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