

BRIEFING | MARCH 2023

Stabilisation and peace in the Sahel

How the EU can better support civil society

The European Union (EU) has a long-standing partnership with civil society in the Sahel and is committed to a ‘civilian leap forward’ in its revised 2021 Sahel strategy.¹ However, research by Assitan Diallo and Delina Goxho – members of the Security Policy Alternatives Network (SPAN)² – found that current EU funding mechanisms systematically exclude many Sahelian civil society organisations (CSOs) from managing peacebuilding and security initiatives in their own countries.

For example, between 2019 and 2022, only two Nigerien CSOs received direct funding from the EU for implementing projects. Remedying this would help to ensure that the EU gets a better return on investment in the region, as well as enabling Sahelian civil society to more effectively manage conflicts and community security in contextually appropriate and conflict- and gender-sensitive ways.

This briefing presents some of the key findings of a longer report³ by the two researchers that focuses on EU financing of Sahelian CSOs, particularly regarding the implementation of the stabilisation and governance components of the Sahel strategy. The research outlines some of the challenges faced by CSOs in accessing direct EU funding and presents recommendations for EU policymakers and the broader donor community. The original report is based on desk-based research and interviews with EU officials and CSOs/NGOs in Brussels, Niamey and Agadez in Niger, and Bamako in Mali in 2021 and 2022. Findings from this report could serve as a pilot for other regions where the EU is an active donor.

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Recommendations for: the EU, international NGOs, and Sahelian NGOs and CSOs

In the Sahel, the lack of meaningful engagement with communities on security provision and the lack of EU-funded security programming that puts communities and local CSOs in the lead – compounded by heavy bureaucratic EU procedures and assessments – hinder CSOs’ ability to fulfil their full role in reducing violent conflict and contributing to sustainable peace. Despite the EU’s rhetoric emphasising its support for Sahelian civil society, this does not match the experiences of CSOs in Mali and Niger. In both countries, Malian and Nigerien CSOs report feeling marginalised from debates on stabilisation policy as well as funding opportunities to implement stabilisation-related projects and programmes. EU funding is almost exclusively top-down, managed by the state or international intermediaries (such as international NGOs, United Nations agencies or via EU Member States’ bilateral cooperation). This is the case for funding for security assistance, peacebuilding, and development and humanitarian aid.

The findings of our previous research⁴ – which have been confirmed by this research – reveal how CSOs are largely excluded from the design and implementation of the EU’s security assistance and security sector reform efforts. While the EU delegations in Mali and Niger allocate some funding for local civil society, CSOs have observed that this is largely for implementing pre-defined objectives such as preventing/countering violent extremism (P/CVE), rather than being based on local priorities determined by Sahelian CSOs in consultation with communities. ‘Whenever [organisations in the Sahel] get funding from the EU, this happens through other organisations who act as intermediaries – retaining part of the money, setting priorities and exerting decision-making authority.’⁵

Since 2018, the EU’s peacebuilding and conflict prevention activities under the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa – as part of its approach to stabilisation – included only one CSO as a recipient of direct EU funding in Niger, to work on trust-building exercises. In Mali, European-funded peacebuilding projects have mostly been managed by the Malian state or international intermediaries. While these projects have had a strong civilian component, they failed to empower the implementing CSOs and build trust between parties. And in 2020, national and local CSOs received no direct humanitarian funding at all in both Mali and Niger. A growing number of CSOs, especially women’s organisations, have been forced to consider closing due to lack of funds. CSOs are frequently involved only at the end of the financial process, as third parties, or as beneficiaries of actions designed and managed by others. This particularly affects smaller CSOs.

Interviews with Sahelian CSOs and analysis revealed the following challenges in obtaining EU funding:

1. Conceptual: CSOs face challenges in understanding the different types of EU programming for ‘stabilisation’, as

well as the EU’s use of the term ‘Sahel’ – at the EU level this often refers to the group of five (G5) Sahel countries,⁶ yet some programming includes Nigeria and Senegal.

2. Procedural: The procedures to apply for funds are long, complex and technical, making it difficult for CSOs to navigate them. CSOs also face difficulties in understanding EU selection criteria and how to comply with EU standards.

3. Management: The EU will often only provide direct funding if organisations demonstrate that they are able to manage it. This leads to a vicious circle for CSOs: they are not awarded direct funds if they have no track record of managing large funds, but they are unable to demonstrate their ability to manage such funds without first receiving them. Many CSOs do not always have the human resource capacity to complete all of the reporting required by the EU.

4. Conflict sensitivity: EU officials usually fund international NGOs in large consortia without tailoring their procedures to ensure that CSOs have a role in the design and implementation stages, and that their operating costs are met. The EU does not sufficiently take into consideration that CSOs in country have a nuanced understanding of local dynamics and day-to-day experience of dealing with their contextual challenges. Funding CSOs in conflict-affected countries would contribute to better conflict sensitivity, identifying and mitigating the factors unintentionally fuelling conflict, and maximising the opportunities to build peace. Moreover, it would contribute to fulfilling the criteria of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development’s Development Assistance Committee: relevance, coherence, effectiveness, efficiency, impact and sustainability.⁷

5. Intermediaries: The EU has a systematic preference for consortia as recipients of direct funds. Under the current system, larger organisations who lead consortia are more likely to receive direct funds, and CSOs also get a raw deal because they struggle to get baseline operating costs; the EU should tailor its procedures to respond to this. The lack of flexibility in the amount of money allocated for baseline operating costs, notwithstanding the size of the consortium, is a substantial issue. There is a need for the EU to move away from a ‘one size fits all’ framework of procedures and criteria and focus on the specific capacities and needs of Sahelian CSOs.

The lack of direct funding for CSOs in the Sahel and their frequent exclusion from the design and implementation phases of many programmes and projects denies them agency to manage violent conflicts and community security in their own contexts, where they have unique expertise. This in turn translates into less local ownership of activities, and can affect the local ‘buy-in’, as well as the long-term sustainability of incremental and transformative change. Modifying this top-down

funding approach and strengthening partnerships with CSOs (especially those representing women and minority interests) would help the EU to gain a stronger understanding of the context and the communities it supports, better address local priorities and concerns, and contribute to more sustainable peacebuilding outcomes in complex, conflict-affected environments.

In addition to delivering on the commitment to investing in civilian-led programming, the central Sahel – notably Niger and Mali – could be a pilot model for future programming based on direct EU funding, which could be implemented elsewhere across the region and further afield. If this bottom-up diversification approach is successful (including how it is monitored and evaluated by national and regional experts), it would provide the EU and the global donor community with evidence, approaches and data to apply in other regions and contexts.

In order to strengthen partnerships with civil society, notably in the Sahel, the EU, international and Sahelian NGOs and CSOs should consider the following recommendations.

The EU

- Encourage an institutional cultural shift that values locally led peacebuilding and seeks to better understand what it means in practice. This could be done through training, awareness raising and partnership meetings for EU staff with CSOs.
- Consider developing national or regional strategies that ensure funding mechanisms are more inclusive of CSOs, integrate lessons from pilots and evaluations of the challenges facing the EU and civil society, and apply them in future calls for applications.
- The EU High Representative, the European External Action Service (EEAS) and the European Commission should engage with international NGOs, CSOs and communities in the operationalisation, monitoring and evaluation of the Sahel strategy.
- Increase budgets to directly fund CSOs based on communities' own needs. This could begin with holding direct consultations with urban and rural CSOs, including those led by women, to identify their priorities.
- Fund CSOs that represent and serve women, youth and other marginalised groups. These groups are often overlooked or disadvantaged either because their ways of organising are 'non-traditional/informal' (not as NGO structures) or because they are not as visible to donors – yet finding ways to support these groups is key to contributing to peace.
- Ensure that subsequent funding opportunities respond to the needs identified and are not conditioned to the EU's interests. In particular, gender-based violence programmes must be implemented on CSOs' own terms, assessed by national gender experts and not immediately assumed to come under a 'security' umbrella.
- Organise trainings, including in rural areas, on how to apply for EU funds; this should include accessible information on the different EU instruments for a diverse range of CSOs (including those representing women and minority rights). Training modules could be developed in consultation with CSOs and delivered in local languages.
- Revise and simplify EU application procedures to make them more accessible, based on feedback and input from CSOs. This process could be monitored and regularly reviewed, including by forums of CSOs and EU officials.
- Prioritise partnership approaches for existing and new consortia, seeking to transparently address some of the power imbalances between CSOs and international NGOs within these clusters of organisations. This should focus on organisations led by women and marginalised groups – which currently struggle to receive funding and face systematic discrimination.
- Adopt a long-term strategic approach to encourage and support urban and rural young women and men working in CSOs to become leaders. This could include organising leadership and mentorship programmes.
- Fund capacity strengthening and peer learning among CSOs, both from the same context and across contexts – particularly smaller CSOs that would benefit from the lessons learnt and good practices of more experienced ones. This could include networking events, learning exchanges and peer-to-peer mentoring, in order to strengthen connections between CSOs working on similar issues.

International NGOs

- Share resources equally with CSOs and national NGOs (such as sharing overheads). They should also commit to investing resources in demand-driven capacity exchange between international NGOs and CSOs, and between CSOs themselves, to support peer-to-peer learning that is responsive to CSOs' priorities. Commitments to 'shifting power' should be reflected in international NGOs' organisational strategies and monitoring and accountability mechanisms.
- Consult with CSOs and communities to ensure programming is better informed, to respond to the needs, concerns and priorities of communities.
- Act as a broker to support and facilitate CSO representatives to have their expert voices heard by European officials, to input in policy, monitoring and review processes as well as all stages of programming cycles.

Sahelian NGOs and CSOs

- Connect in thematic networks in order to constitute a counter-power force capable of being heard by national and international state actors.
- Consider developing an alternative CSO roadmap for the EU, in the form of a document outlining what they require from the EU in terms of training, communication and funding application procedures.

About Saferworld

Saferworld is an independent, not-for-profit international organisation working to prevent violent conflict and build safer lives in countries and territories across Africa, Asia and the Middle East. We work in solidarity with people affected by conflict to improve their safety and sense of security, and conduct wider research and analysis. We use this evidence and learning to improve local, national and international policies and practices that can help build lasting peace. Our priority is people – we believe in a world where everyone can lead peaceful, fulfilling lives, free from fear and insecurity.

About SPAN (Security Policy Alternatives Network)





This briefing is a product of the Security Policy Alternatives Network (SPAN). SPAN is an initiative of expert voices from countries badly affected by current trends, such as Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Mali and the Sahel, the Philippines, Somalia, Syria, Tunisia and Yemen, and their colleagues working on security policy in Western policy centres such as Washington DC, New York, London, Brussels, Paris and Berlin.

The US, European countries, the UN Security Council and other powerful nations and coalitions are heavily invested in military, technical, financial and diplomatic ‘security’ initiatives that often end up worsening and perpetuating the very conflicts they are supposed to stop or prevent. Decisions about these initiatives are made without consulting the people most affected and those working to promote peace and rights. If we are serious about keeping people safe, protecting their rights and building just and lasting peace around the world – then this must change.

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Cover photo: People shop at a market in Bamako, Mali.
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Notes

- 1 Available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2021/04/19/sahel-council-approves-conclusions-on-the-eu-s-integrated-strategy-in-the-region/>
- 2 The Security Policy Alternatives Network (SPAN) is an initiative of expert voices from countries badly affected by current trends, such as Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Mali and the Sahel, the Philippines, Somalia, Syria, Tunisia and Yemen, as well as their colleagues working on security policy in Western policy centres such as Washington DC, New York, London, Brussels, Paris and Berlin.
- 3 Diallo A, Goxho D (2023), ‘Donor Dilemmas in the Sahel: How the EU can better support civil society in Mali and Niger’, Saferworld, March.
- 4 Montanaro L (2022), ‘Insecurity in the Sahel: rethinking Europe’s response’, Saferworld and Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, April (https://www.saferworld.org.uk/resources/publications/1387-insecurity-in-the-sahel-rethinking-europes-response?utm_source=smartmail&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Insecurity+in+the+Sahel%3A+rethinking+Europe%27s+response); Saferworld (2022), ‘How not to lose the Sahel: Community perspectives on insecurity and international interventions’, February (<https://www.saferworld.org.uk/resources/publications/1385-how-not-to-lose-the-sahel-community-perspectives-on-insecurity-and-international-interventions-in-mali-niger-and-burkina-faso>); Guiryanan O, Montanaro L, Rätty T (2021), ‘European Security Assistance: the search for stability in the Sahel’, Saferworld, September (<https://www.saferworld.org.uk/resources/publications/1368-european-security-assistance-the-search-for-stability-in-the-sahel>)
- 5 Goxho D (2021), ‘Unpacking the EU’s New Sahel Strategy’, Egmont Institute, 22 April (<https://www.egmontinstitute.be/unpacking-the-eus-new-sahel-strategy/>)
- 6 The G5 Sahel countries are Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger.
- 7 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, Development Assistance Committee, ‘Evaluation Criteria’ (<https://www.oecd.org/dac/evaluation/dacriteriaforevaluatingdevelopmentassistance.htm>)

