



Staying engaged as Team Europe in fragile settings

ETTG Collective Report 3/2024

KEY MESSAGES

Authors:

Sophie Desmidt (ECDPM)

Julian Bergmann (IDOS)

Benedikt Erforth (IDOS)

Sara Giancesello (ECDPM)

1. This report aims to support discussions around how European actors (including EU institutions, EU member states' governments, and European agencies for international cooperation¹ (hereafter European agencies) can stay engaged with a Team Europe spirit in fragile settings in a rapidly changing geopolitical environment. For many European agencies, operating in fragile settings has become the new normal. In their engagement in such settings, European agencies have purposefully reinforced locally led approaches to development, relying on existing local networks of partners, information and access, and have adapted their (financial) risk and human resource management. These European agencies have aimed to reinforce 'Team Europe' approaches and expand their operations across the humanitarian-development-peace nexus.
2. Looking more specifically at politically complex settings, including the Central Sahel (Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger), European agencies have applied a range of tools and approaches to 'stay engaged', but are reaching the limits of what they can achieve at the systemic level in the absence of a shared European political strategy. The experience of European agencies in fragile settings, including the Central Sahel, should be looked at closely, as they provide relevant experiences for designing more effective engagements and partnerships in fragile settings globally; while supporting a more coordinated Team Europe approach, and applying the Triple Nexus.



KEY MESSAGES (CONTINUED)

3. This will be all the more important as a new European Commission takes office which will be mandated to further fine tune the roll-out of the Global Gateway approach, but also to develop tailored and differentiated approaches to least developed countries and an integrated approach to fragile settings. This Commission will also launch discussions on the next EU Multiannual Financial Framework – setting out the priorities and instruments which will underpin the EU's external engagements and partnerships.
4. From the research, one overarching recommendation that emerges with regard to Europe's engagement with the countries of the Central Sahel specifically is that the European Commission, EU member states and European agencies need to consider closely the challenges, risks and limitations of not cooperating or reducing cooperation with central governments in the Central Sahel. As European agencies are facing the limits of what they can achieve in these complex political settings, the political objectives of the EU's engagement in the region should be better and more explicitly defined and communicated.
5. With regard to fragile settings more generally, the following recommendations emerge:
 - European agencies need to continue to strengthen their expertise and capacity to conduct in-depth and granular context and conflict analysis in order to fully understand local contexts and to identify the right cooperation partners at different levels. They should build on their current experiences, network and access to help support a clearer rationale, and theory of change of why the EU institutions and European member states' governments should continue their support to development challenges in fragile settings. Also, European agencies, in strong collaboration with the European Commission as well as EU delegations, should reinforce their support for locally led approaches to development in fragile settings, building on strengthened conflict analysis, and with a locally informed understanding of the civil society landscape.
 - The European Commission, EU delegations and European agencies should continue to seek effective information sharing and coordination mechanisms. Such increased coordination should also lead to actually doing more together, in terms of joint planning and implementation, using joint funding and conducting joint monitoring and evaluation, and really building on the strengths of individual agencies and donors.
 - EU actors, including EU delegations, member states and the European Commission, in close collaboration with European agencies and other development actors on the ground, should invest the necessary efforts to develop an integrated and multidimensional understanding of fragility that can inform all of the EU's engagements in fragile settings, including through Global Gateway.
 - Finally, ahead of the negotiations for the next EU MFF, the EU and the European Commission, in close collaboration with EU member states' governments, should carefully consider the suitability of current EU instruments to respond to fragile settings and identify appropriate changes, based on past lessons learned.

1. For the purpose of this report, we will use the shorter term 'European agencies', which refers to a diverse group (varying greatly in terms of their organisational structure and statutes) of European agencies for international cooperation, including all of those brought together under the European Practitioners Network (PN) for European Development cooperation.

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 BACKGROUND

Fragile contexts face vulnerabilities on multiple fronts, and with heightened intensity. While exposed to a multitude of different risks and shocks, ranging from armed conflicts to extreme climate events and economic distress, the common denominator that defines the extent of their fragility is their weak state, societal and human capacity to manage, absorb and mitigate these risks, and their limited resilience to prepare for future shocks. However, fragility is about more than weak (state and societal) capacity and low economic growth, and while it increases the risks of (intra- and inter-communal) conflict, most fragile contexts are not conflict-affected (OECD, 2022). Fragility is far from straightforward – it is intricate and multidimensional, varying in intensity across six key dimensions: economic, environmental, political, security, societal and human (OECD, 2022).

The OECD's flagship report on 'States of Fragility' from 2022 recorded more than 60 fragile contexts, determined on the basis of its multidimensional fragility assessment.² Through humanitarian, development and stabilisation, or peacebuilding support, European actors have aimed to mitigate the consequences of growing fragility.

However, the deterioration of some situations and a recalibration of priorities are pushing European actors to reconsider their strategies. For example, the deteriorating security situation of the Central Sahel, and the recent (anti-Western) political shifts in the region have been a major cause for concern and reflection among the European Union (EU), its member states and their European agencies on how (and if) to stay engaged in the region. The recent coups d'état in Mali (May 2021), Burkina Faso (January and September 2022) and Niger (July 2023) signalled the long-standing discontent of populations grappling with instability and threats of jihadi expansion, and their frustration with the failure of regional and international (Western) mechanisms to effectively curb the jihadist insurgency and the spread of violence. In assuming control, the Central Sahel military governments have become more defiant of traditional partners, like the EU but also the US, and have adopted a confrontational anti-

Western rhetoric and pro-sovereign discourse and position (Desmidt, 2024; Lebovich, 2024). The three countries sent a notice to the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) to leave the organisation and have formed a new and separate *Alliance des États du Sahel* (AES).

In this context, the military governments have continued to strengthen or establish (security) partnerships with countries that have rocky relationships with the EU, such as China, Turkey and Gulf states. Russia too is playing a pivotal role, notably through the expansion of its military operations via the Africa Corps and recent arms sales, though its ties to the region go back three decades (Stronski, 2023). While these actors are intensifying their relations with the military governments in the Sahel, the EU by contrast has partially retreated from the region. Although unified on the conclusion to disengage militarily, EU member states take rather different positions on other forms of engagement, be it developmental or humanitarian (Brown, 2024; Desmidt, 2024).

European agencies operating in fragile contexts are caught in the middle of these strategic changes. They find themselves juggling new geopolitical considerations that their national governments are promoting; and the sometimes contradictory or uncoordinated instructions from the EU and its member states – fuelling the perception of a 'European disunion'. In addition, responding to fragile settings raises (known) issues around applying financial instruments which are not necessarily fit for purpose in fragile settings, and concerns about the feasibility of new approaches, like Global Gateway. Other questions European actors grapple with involve how to ensure a continued support to fragile contexts, in line with the humanitarian-development-peace (HDP) nexus; and remain true to their core mandate of delivering sustainable development actions in countries that are increasingly fragile and present serious security risks.

This report aims to support discussions around how European actors can stay engaged with a Team Europe spirit in fragile contexts in a rapidly changing geopolitical environment. Our focus is mostly on providing clarity on the space and modalities available for European agencies (and other international donors and implementing partners) to have greater impact in fragile contexts; but we also offer reflections for the EU leadership, and EU member states'

2. The OECD describes fragility as 'combination of exposure to risk and insufficient coping capacities of the state, system and/or communities to manage, absorb or mitigate those risks'. Six dimensions of fragility are recognised, namely economic, environmental, political, security, societal and human (see OECD, 2022).

governments on how to stay engaged in such contexts. The findings presented in this report stem from literature analysis, previous research and key informant interviews with over 30 practitioners and experts, which took place between June and October 2024. Preliminary findings from this research were also discussed during a high-level roundtable discussion and expert-level workshop, both held on 17 October 2024, and organised by GIZ and Enabel, in Brussels.

While we mostly draw from examples from the Central Sahel, several lessons learned and recommendations are valid and can be applied in other fragile contexts as well.

The report is structured as follows: In the remainder of Chapter 1, we discuss the current policy responses to engaging in fragile contexts. In Chapter 2, we discuss the multi-sectoral and multi-level approach currently deployed by European agencies and some of the challenges and best practices therein. Chapter 3 looks at the question of 'who to work with' at various levels. Chapter 4 examines the extent to which Team Europe has enabled more coordination between European agencies and the impact of the Global Gateway on European engagement in fragile settings. In the closing Chapter 5, we present our recommendations.

1.2 CURRENT POLICY RESPONSES ON ENGAGING IN FRAGILE CONTEXTS

Recognising the changing nature and the increasing fragility of some contexts, the EU and several EU member states have called for more strategic engagement in fragile contexts. For example, the Belgian EU Presidency issued a paper (European Council, 2024) outlining ways to enhance EU development cooperation in a Team Europe spirit in fragile and politically constrained environments. In October 2024, the German Federal Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) issued a position paper on how Germany can overcome fragility through an effective development policy, stressing that 'wherever possible, Team Europe approaches should be pursued' (BMZ, 2024).

Operationally, European agencies are also calling for continued attention to fragile settings. In a joint article, the CEO of Enabel, Jean Van Wetter, and the Chair of the Board of GIZ, Thorsten Schäfer-Gümbel, stressed that failing to address dimensions and root causes of fragility will undermine the achievements of results on issues that are in the front seat of EU policy discussions, such as migration, security, energy and environmental transition (Enabel and GIZ, 2024). The Belgian EU Presidency paper,

the BMZ position paper, and the Enabel and GIZ joint article recognise that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to fragile contexts. Context-specific and conflict-sensitive development measures are key, and become more impactful when implemented in a joint and/or coordinated manner and when they are people-centred.

However, European actors are far from reaching a shared European consensus on how (and if) to remain engaged in fragile settings, both at the political and operational levels. For example, not all donor and European agencies see staying engaged in the Central Sahel as a given, and some European actors have decided to leave the region altogether. They did so for different reasons. For some, the costs of a continuous engagement have become increasingly high. For others, (government) priorities shifted in the wake of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, towards Eastern Europe and the immediate neighbourhood. But they also did so because they did not see a possibility to have a positive impact on long-term systemic changes that may improve and support development in the region (Interview, September 2024).

Instead of solely questioning whether to stay engaged or not, our research suggests that emphasis should rather be placed on clarifying the rationale behind, and possible impact of, the decision to stay engaged. This should also include investments in careful and consistent communication on those decisions, to partners and communities on the ground, but also to national and international partners and audiences (including for example national parliaments). Equally crucial in this endeavour, will be to continuously assess whether the EU's response frameworks, partnerships and funding instruments are well-fitted for engagements in fragile contexts. The incoming European Commission, and in particular the Commissioners for International Partnerships, Jozef Síkela, and for Preparedness, Crisis Management and Equality, Hadja Lahbib, have been tasked to develop a 'differentiated approach' to fragile contexts (European Parliament, 2024a), and to develop a Commission-wide integrated approach on fragility (European Parliament, 2024b). These approaches will be key to inform the EU's future engagement in fragile settings, in the short to medium term. Furthermore, as of January 2025, the EU will start negotiations on its next Multi-Annual Financial Framework (MFF) and related budgets and instruments, a pivotal moment to consider the suitability of the EU's financial commitments and tools, including as part of its response to global challenges in fragile settings.



2 A MULTI-NEXUS AND MULTI-LEVEL APPROACH

In response to the unique challenges faced by European agencies in fragile settings, it is crucial to adapt both the objectives and approaches of development cooperation initiatives. This adaptation needs to take into account the specific characteristics of fragility in a given setting, which can range from security challenges to political instability to politically constrained contexts where external partners' cooperation with state authorities becomes difficult. While there is broad support among European agencies for the rationale of staying engaged, it is clear that engagement alone does not constitute a strategy. Below we highlight a series of core considerations essential for a more strategic approach to fragility.



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2.1 NEED FOR CLARITY ON POLITICAL OBJECTIVES OF STAYING ENGAGED

Given the challenges faced by European agencies operating in fragile settings, both the objectives and approaches of development cooperation interventions must be adapted to suit these conditions. Whilst our interview findings suggest that there is broad support among many European agencies about the rationale of staying engaged, interlocutors also highlighted that a more fundamental adaptation of approaches is needed.

Engagement in fragile settings tends to be more effective when the political objectives of continued involvement are clearly defined. European agencies do not exist in a vacuum but are operating under certain framework conditions set by their governments, which means that they need to follow their governments' line and policy towards a certain country or region.

When European agencies are mandated to remain engaged in complex and highly volatile settings, political guidance from donor governments becomes even more critical than in other contexts. This guidance is essential for enabling agencies to effectively fulfil their mission in fragile environments. Simultaneously, clarifying common political objectives for staying engaged at the EU level is a prerequisite for being able to work together effectively as Team Europe. A clarification of political objectives of staying engaged should include the specification of a 'theory of change' of engagement in these highly complex and fragile settings, including those that are politically challenging, which requires a realistic assessment of potentials and limits of the impact of the engagement in the short to medium term. **Setting realistic political objectives for staying engaged in fragile contexts should also translate into the provision of adequate resources, as engagement in these contexts is more cost-intensive and may require a strategy of differentiated budgets in order to be able to adapt to changing political circumstances.**



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2.2 OPEN AND TRANSPARENT COMMUNICATION REQUIRED

Clarity on political objectives is also important for donor governments and European agencies to communicate effectively both to the broader public in the country of engagement and to domestic constituencies on why they are staying engaged and to what ends. Explaining the objectives and rationale of engagement to broader audiences helps to manage expectations and avoid creating unrealistic hopes about the potential impact of interventions in such highly complex and challenging environments. The clearer the overall political objectives are communicated by donor governments; the better European agencies can design their interventions in a way that they make the most effective contribution to those objectives. Here, interviewees stressed the importance of focusing on results also as a way for agencies to demonstrate the continuous value of staying engaged in fragile contexts (Interviews, July 2024). As international cooperation and the work of European agencies is becoming increasingly politicised and questioned by domestic constituents across Europe, transparent, understandable, evidence-based and proactive communication about the value and need of engaging in fragile settings becomes even more important.

However, clarity of objectives alone is not enough to guarantee effective engagement. When communicating with local and central governments in countries of engagement, using terms like 'politically estranged settings' may prove counterproductive. The term describes situations where either an unconstitutional change of government has occurred or a state is under comprehensive international sanctions, as well as those where a state is in a contested electoral situation where donor governments do not recognise the party claiming victory or have prohibitions against it. Despite its analytical value in describing the challenging conditions for European agencies working in those contexts, the term has a negative connotation, which might be perceived as a derogatory label by national governments. Instead of predetermining discussions with national governments through the use of such labels, conversations with national governments should focus on working out differences but also possibly remaining overlaps of interests.

As interview partners highlighted, the experience of the past few years in the Central Sahel has been that the military governments are still open to discussing a variety

of issues with their international partners, but in these exchanges they also express a strong commitment to the notion of sovereignty as well as the wish of being actively listened to and their interests being taken seriously (Interview, October 2024). It is therefore crucial for European agencies to strike the right balance between engaging in honest dialogue and clearly communicating their own interests and criteria for engagement – and our interviews indicated several examples of this already being done during technical level exchanges between European agencies and national counterparts (Interview, October 2024).

Similarly, interviewees emphasised the importance of finding alternative framings for key cross-cutting issues that are often perceived as post-colonial continuities and associated with a 'Western' agenda, such as gender and women's rights (Interviews, September 2024). In dialogues with central and local governments, European agencies now face increased contestation on these topics, making it crucial to present them in a way that resonates with local perspectives. This is less about fundamentally changing priorities and more about framing specific issues in ways that align with local agendas and contexts. For example, when addressing women's participation in decision-making, the focus might be on communicating how the involvement of women – mothers, sisters and daughters – can contribute to the success of the local community. This approach presents women's participation as an idea rooted in the local context, rather than a 'foreign-imposed' agenda (Interviews, September 2024). Local interlocutors play a crucial role in developing and promoting these locally grounded narratives in a dialogue-oriented and participatory way.

2.3 RESPONDING TO RISING INSECURITY: SECURITY RISK MANAGEMENT AND RECRUITMENT POLICIES

In light of the evolving security landscape – particularly the uneven impact of military coups across different regions – some agencies have re-evaluated their geographic engagement. Several interviewees from different agencies noted that concentrating their engagement geographically may require difficult choices about withdrawing from certain regions. However, focusing on areas where direct project implementation is feasible and where the potential for sustainable impact is higher



can be crucial in fragile contexts. Additionally, varying levels of risk tolerance among agencies have influenced their decisions, with some being more constrained by internal security regulations than others. Based on updated security risk assessments, some agencies have taken the strategic decision to concentrate their engagement on areas that are less affected by insecurity and thus still more accessible. Others rely increasingly on local staff and outsource part of their work to guarantee a minimum presence. Cooperation with local NGOs has in some cases increased, as many of them were facing challenges similar to those European agencies saw themselves confronted with.


European agencies, at times, also apply instruments that have specifically been designed for conflict and crisis situations. These are financed and labelled as crisis and not development instruments, or as 'transitional development assistance' as by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ). Agencies have also applied a range of tools and policies to conduct fragility assessments in support of their engagement in fragile settings, such as the Fragility Resilience Assessment Management Exercise (FRAME) applied by Enabel (Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, n.d.). Such tools also rely on continuous proximity to local populations through regular exchanges and information gathering through local networks, advanced security management and standardised risk management. This goes hand in hand with adopting additional security measures that allow a continuous even though at times minimal engagement in the regions. As confirmed by interlocutors from different agencies, local staff took on a special role in most cases. Recruitment of local staff as well as local consultants primarily takes place within the region, whereas foreign staff remains present in the capital cities or in regional offices (Interview, August 2024).

Regional projects and programmes that go beyond cooperation with a single country offer an important risk-pooling and/or mitigation mechanism for donors, focused on cross-country issues and global public good. They offer a built-in incentive to continue delivery, even when one participant undergoes upheaval.

2.4 ADAPTING MULTI-LEVEL AND TERRITORIAL APPROACHES TO FRAGILE SETTINGS

Adopting a multi-level approach is nothing new for European agencies. For many agencies, local authorities have been central to their operations, providing crucial access, credibility and long-term staying power (on the operationalisation of the multi-level approach, see Chapter 3). Multi-level engagement has often been part of territorial approaches (GIZ, 2023), which have long been a key strategy for European agencies in fragile contexts. A territorial approach implies a place-based, people-centred and rights-based engagement to provide context-specific efforts for sustainable development, in close coordination with national and local authorities. An example is the so-called Integrated Territorial Approach (ITA) developed by the members of the Sahel Alliance, which implies geographically targeted interventions in ten priority risk areas across the Central Sahel with the objective to respond to the most urgent needs of populations in various sectors, while also aiming to address the root causes of fragility in these areas. The ITA is implemented in close coordination with the countries' authorities across different levels. The adaptation of such territorial approaches has prompted several agencies to reconsider not only where they operate, but also with whom they collaborate and in which sectors (see Chapter 3).

Our research findings suggest that a prerequisite for adopting a multi-level approach effectively is to have a very thorough understanding of the national and local context, which may require European agencies to invest even more resources in dedicated, micro-level conflict analyses that can be regularly updated. Many agencies have conducted careful evaluations to decide whether to remain in, or withdraw from, fragile and challenging areas. The extent to which European agencies collaborate with local authorities varies across contexts. In some cases, political considerations shape the nature of the partnership, while in other, highly fragile settings, local authorities might be de facto non-present or non-functional, which means that adopting a territorial approach might be difficult or even impossible.



In many cases the representatives of local authorities who were in charge prior to the respective coups remained in their offices, which allows for the continuation of technical cooperation at the local level. European agencies maintain long-standing relations with local authorities and the focus on technical cooperation is important, although it does not mean that technical cooperation may not also strengthen political legitimacy of some local actors. Moreover, local authorities in countries that experienced military coups may also find themselves in a situation of increased pressure for following the political lines of central governments, which may limit their ability to cooperate with European agencies, and hence the implementation of a localised approach (for a more in-depth analysis of the implications of such approach, see Chapter 3).

2.5 APPLYING A TRIPLE NEXUS AND NEEDS-BASED APPROACH

Following the 2016 Humanitarian World Summit and subsequent calls by UN Secretary-General Guterres for a joint policy approach to mitigate humanitarian, development and security needs, the concept of the humanitarian-development-peace nexus (HDP nexus) became the main reference point in debates about how to better link different policy frameworks and foster a multi-stakeholder, conflict-sensitive and people-centred approach in fragile settings (Baroncelli, 2023). UN organisations have played a leading role in further institutionalising and operationalising the HDP nexus approach.

For the EU, the European Consensus on Development in 2017 highlighted the ‘nexus between sustainable development, humanitarian action, peace and security’ and called on EU institutions and member states to implement actions in these domains ‘in a more coherent and complementary way’ (European Commission, 2017). While the Council Conclusions of May 2017 on operationalising the humanitarian-development nexus did not yet include the peace dimension, it was only in 2018 that HDP nexus became a main reference point in EU external policy discourse (European Council, 2017). Since then, the so-called Triple Nexus has been applied in a variety of contexts. It is a key instrument to address conditions of fragility. It provides a framework for bringing together humanitarian, development and peace actors around a common objective to tackle the underlying causes of fragility, mitigate the effects of fragility and contribute to sustainable development outcomes to ensure human security (European Council, 2017).

As several interlocutors have emphasised, in fragile contexts, prioritising a people-centred and needs-based approach through the Triple Nexus is considered paramount. On this aspect, European agencies bring added value, as their modus operandi is to align projects to the needs of local populations, which in turn builds the credibility of the agency among the local communities. Our research suggests that there has been a proliferation of HDP nexus initiatives among donors and European agencies working in the Central Sahel. In practice however, challenges remain concerning the full integration of European agencies, humanitarian and peace-related activities, beyond (still imperfect) information sharing and building a growing awareness around the need to apply a Triple Nexus perspective. A lack of a comprehensive overview of which actors are engaged in specific activities, coupled with issues of transparency, and intrinsic differences between actors (funding streams, programming timelines) has undermined the effectiveness of coordination efforts among stakeholders from different domains. To a certain degree, the lack of coordination may also stem from reluctance on the part of humanitarian organisations to fully embrace cooperation with development and peacebuilding actors who pursue a more political approach and do not apply the humanitarian principle of independence from government and political actors – a challenge also faced within the UN set of actors operating in the Central Sahel.

The Central Sahel poses an additional challenge given the politically constrained relationships between Western governments and the current national leaderships. Ultimately, the Triple Nexus aims to improve the (living and security) situation of communities in need of assistance – but also is seen as a way to structurally engage with the partner countries to strengthen their ability and capacity to address those needs, in contexts of combined humanitarian crises, violent conflict processes and development deficiencies. This requires a trusted relationship between partner governments, and development, peace and humanitarian actors. After the military coups, maintaining such level of cooperation with central authorities has become increasingly challenging for many Team Europe actors, although some of them have managed to hold regular and constructive dialogue with various technical ministries.



There are several lessons that can be learned from the success and failures of implementing the Triple Nexus that are highly relevant for European agencies' engagement in fragile settings (European Commission, 2022b).

First, it requires a shared understanding of the added-value, challenges and constraints of the Triple Nexus across all actors involved. This should not be taken as a given, as several interview partners shared the observation that nexus partners sometimes do not share the same language concerning the nexus, which makes coordination on procedures and implementation measures more difficult. As one interlocutor put it, 'the more we talk to humanitarian counterparts and peacebuilding organisations, the more we become aware of our differences. There is still a lot to do to make this concept truly operational on the ground' (Interviews, September 2024).

Second, capacity constraints both at the headquarters and country level as well as structural and procedural bottlenecks can impede operationalising the Triple Nexus (European Commission, 2022b). Evaluations show that the human and financial resources for operationalising the Triple Nexus as well as the need for knowledge sharing are often underestimated (European Commission, 2022b). Especially, mobilising financial resources for operationalising the Triple Nexus in a flexible and speedy manner often proves to be a challenge. So far, Triple Nexus actions have been funded from a variety of different sources, sometimes proving it challenging to mobilise adequate, coherent and sustainable funding levels (Bergmann & Müller, 2024). Previous research suggests that dedicated and flexible funding sources are required for operationalising the Triple Nexus (European Commission, 2022b). There seems to be an emerging consensus among EU policy-makers that dedicated funding with flexible modalities for addressing fragility and operationalising a Triple Nexus approach is needed – both in the short-term and with regard to the next Multi-annual Financial Framework (GIZ-Enabel high-level roundtable, October 2024). As the Commissioner-designate for International Partnerships highlighted in his written answers to the questionnaire by the European Parliament, '[b]eyond Global Gateway, the EU should maintain dedicated resources to engage in fragile and conflict-affected settings' (European Parliament, 2024a).

Previous EU Trust Funds such as the Bêkou Trust Fund, the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa or the European Trust Fund for Colombia may serve as potential examples for pooled funding mechanisms that provide the necessary flexibility to operationalise a Triple Nexus approach. The lessons learnt from the implementation of previous EU Trust Funds should inform any future debates about a dedicated EU funding mechanism for implementing a Triple Nexus approach (European Court of Auditors, 2024).

The Minka Peace and Resilience Fund, which is the dedicated financial instrument of the *Agence Française de Développement (AFD)* to prevent and respond to crises and violent conflicts and for mainstreaming of conflict sensitivity, may serve as another example of how flexible funding can support a Triple Nexus approach in fragile settings (AFD, 2024). Set up in 2017 and renewed in 2024, the fund has provided around 1.2 billion Euro to projects focussing on crisis prevention and response, including 603 million Euro to the dedicated Minka Sahel Initiative. Based on a regional approach, the latter has sought to strengthen the social links between communities and trust between populations and their institutions, targeting specifically the most vulnerable of populations and prioritising a partnership-based approach that builds on cooperation with humanitarian, development and peacebuilding actors.

Third, there is a risk of bureaucratisation in implementing the Triple Nexus that can undermine flexibility and ultimately the effectiveness and impact of a Triple Nexus approach. Working through the Triple Nexus can increase transaction costs due to additional operational resources and time required for coordination among nexus actors, joint planning and reporting (European Commission, 2022b). The bureaucratic complexity of Team Europe may add to this challenge when adopting a Triple Nexus approach among different European actors. Shortening the bureaucratic chain and designing procedures to be as parsimonious as possible is important. Our research suggests that smaller European agencies may have more flexibility in this regard compared to larger European agencies, as they have shorter decision-making chains and may allow for more flexibility for innovating new approaches (Interview, July 2024).



3 IDENTIFICATION OF KEY ACTORS AND PARTNERS IN FRAGILE SETTINGS

A close corollary of European agencies determining how to work in fragile settings, is identifying who to work with. In such contexts, donors, including European agencies, are faced with heightened challenges of understanding and closely following rapidly changing developments in the lay of the land. Gathering and sharing information becomes all the more important and complex due to political fractures and sensitivities between donors and national governments.

3.1 SUPPORTING LOCALLY LED DEVELOPMENT WITHOUT CREATING PARALLEL STRUCTURES

Although the multi-level approach is not in itself a new concept for European agencies, even in fragile contexts, the challenge lies in making such an approach work in contexts where cooperation with the national level has become more difficult. This is particularly true in the Central Sahel, where cooperation with central governments is perceived as risky, especially by political leadership and electorates in European capitals. The main concern is that engaging with these governments may inadvertently lend legitimacy to regimes seen as illegitimate by donors and international actors. Conversely, others fear the EU might (further) lose credibility against its stated objectives to defend and promote fundamental and universal values by collaborating with unelected regimes, of which it is already accused in its collaboration with other countries. Most importantly, however, these regimes also refuse to engage with European states, whom they accuse of infringing upon their national sovereignty. In response,

cooperation at either the regional or local levels, in some cases bypassing the national level, has become a main pinnacle to remain engaged. As Cliffe et al. (2023) note, to prevent further deterioration of social structures, capacities and governance, 'new accountability arrangements with populations and institutions' are needed, including with 'local communities, subnational authorities and local civil society organisations (CSOs) and their evolving attitudes towards the governance and delivery of services provided by their national authorities' (Cliffe et al., 2023).

While regional cooperation frameworks emerge as a necessary and important level of engagement, for the Central Sahel, the region has been marked by an additional layer of complexity since the three Central Sahel countries have stated their intention to leave the regional bloc ECOWAS. This also raises questions on how to best engage with ECOWAS as European partners, and seeking the best entry points and partners to implement regional, including cross-border, programmes and initiatives in the Sahel (GIZ-Enabel high-level roundtable, October 2024). Several European agencies have designed cross-border (regional) programmes, to apply an integrated territorial approach that takes into account the realities on the ground, including those in border regions. To support regional programmes, in complementarity with national and local programmes, dedicated instruments and budgets are also needed. For example, one practitioner referred to the regional programmes under the EU Trust Funds, where lessons learned and best practices are still emerging. For example, cross-border and regional programmes require specific attention to coordination and integration.³

3. Under the EUTF Sahel & Lake Chad window, but also the EUTF's Horn of Africa window, there were several regional and cross-border programmes.



But experts and practitioners consulted for this report raised critical remarks about the longevity of by-passing national governments as a strategy to stay engaged (including through regional programmes), especially for development cooperation. While the humanitarian principles allow humanitarian actors to deliver lifesaving assistance to the most vulnerable populations without having to engage with national governments, European agencies' representatives underline the mandate of development cooperation to work on systemic change and institutional capacity, and to support governments to improve and strengthen service delivery (GIZ-Enabel high-level roundtable, October 2024).

In practice, European agencies have adopted country-specific strategies, including territorial approaches, with tailored responses to different regions or zones of interventions. This is not just the case for the programmatic design of their interventions, but also within their financial management, human resource management and procurement processes. Embedded in this are adaptive management processes to shift their activities to different regions and actors in reaction to developments on the ground.

In policy discussions around territorial approaches and 'locally led development',⁴ local authorities have become a major point of attention on how to stay engaged in a fragile context. One interviewee noted: 'The village chiefs never leave during difficult times.' Local non-governmental organisations and authorities stay no matter what and supporting them long-term is deemed quintessential for several development practitioners (European Council, 2024). In practice, our research shows that local and subnational authorities, but also other local actors, such as traditional leaders, local civil society organisations, professional groups or informal structures, are not really 'new' among European agencies' partners. On the contrary, developmental agencies frequently note that their networks are more extensive than 'newer actors' such as humanitarian or peacebuilding organisations. For some agencies, these networks and long-standing relations are the backbone of current access and credibility in fragile settings, which could possibly be leveraged (better) to build back

political dialogue and buy-in. As part of this, cultural engagement and dialogue has also been promoted by international educational organisations focused on cultural relations, but this could be reinforced further in fragile settings. Several agencies have invested in very careful human resources policies, hiring highly knowledgeable local staff with in-depth understanding of local realities and sensitivities, and issues around representation (Interviews, July & September 2024). Effective collaboration with local organisations, including CSOs, depends on ensuring that EU funding instruments are designed to be flexible and easily accessible. For example, attention was drawn to the limited capacity of local peacebuilding organisations to absorb funding effectively. A well-known challenge is that local organisations, particularly those outside central capitals, have limited access to information about funding opportunities and face challenges in building capacity to respond effectively (European Council, 2024).

Overall, a cautious approach is warranted with respect to engaging with CSOs. This is especially salient in contexts where civic space is under pressure, and where central governments have tightened their grip on political participation but also on the activities of NGOs and CSOs. In several fragile settings, governments have curtailed the access of local organisations to 'foreign funding'. This ties back to the need for a granular and constantly evolving analysis of developments on the ground by European agencies (GIZ-Enabel expert-level workshop, 2024).



Effective collaboration with local organisations, including CSOs, depends on ensuring that EU funding instruments are designed to be flexible and easily accessible.



4. See also Belgian EU Presidency Paper (EU Council, 2024).

Further, as one recent report notes, in authoritarian settings, the lines between central government and certain CSOs risk being blurred. While this trend should not be generalised, it reinforces the point of having 'up-to-date knowledge about local CSO landscapes, flexible funding instruments, and a clearly defined strategy that entails risk mitigation measures while embedding CSO support in a concerted political approach' (Gutheil & Tschörner, 2024).

3.2 ENGAGING WITH VARIOUS INTEREST GROUPS: YOUTH, WOMEN AND DIASPORA GROUPS

The Belgian EU Presidency paper underlined the need to engage more purposefully with youth and women, 'as agents of change' (European Council, 2024). Women (but also other groups like LGBTQI+, disabled people and others) are at the centre of Germany's feminist development policy, adopted in 2023 together with its third Development Policy Action Plan on Gender Equality (2023–27) (BMZ, 2023a, 2023b). European agencies, but also EU member state governments and the European Commission have adapted a range of frameworks and strategies to integrate gender- and youth-sensitive perspectives in their work. However, in some contexts issues around gender have become contested (UN, 2024). In several instances, careful wording around gender has been applied to seek to ensure continued buy-in from central governments, for example on projects focused on women's participation (see also Chapter 2).

In all this, development agency representatives underlined the need to diversify their interlocutors and networks, including women and youth. In fragile contexts, 'when donors invite civil society, including youth and women (groups), there is a risk that they become politically vulnerable' (Interview, July 2024), and victim to retaliation by central governments. Therefore, practitioners and experts also pointed out the need to apply a careful 'do no harm' approach to avoid their interlocutors in partner countries becoming victims of instrumentalisation, politicisation or suppression. But the discourse around 'youth as change agents' should be nuanced and several interlocutors noted

that in Central Sahel countries, anti-Western sentiment is often strong among the youth. Youth rarely constitutes a homogeneous group and understanding it as such would produce wrongful conclusions.

In an effort to include youth more closely, the diaspora has also emerged as an important group. This group is viewed not only as an important interlocutor but also as a key stakeholder, with many expected to return to their country of origin and play significant roles in local initiatives and innovations. At the same time, there is also evidence that diaspora tend to differ in their political attitudes from populations that live in their countries of origin.⁵ This differentiation reinforces over time.

Therefore, careful and context-sensitive engagement, but also carefully designed dialogue and exchange that takes seriously the wide array of positions and interests of youth groups (including those that may disagree with Western positions, and including diaspora) and other social movements is needed, particularly in fragile settings. In addition, a viable approach could be to support the interlinkages between youth groups, and elders and other influential societal actors in order to decrease the vulnerability of youth movements, which is particularly high in autocratic systems.

3.3 GROWING AWARENESS OF THE POLITICAL REALITY OF LOCAL AUTHORITIES AND THEIR RELATIONSHIPS WITH CENTRAL GOVERNMENTS

The multi-level approach deployed by European agencies is strongly anchored on a commitment to contribute to local needs, conscious of local realities and a granular understanding of local political economy. Here, several interlocutors also suggest a reality check on political ties between local and central governments, and to avoid treating 'local actors' as a general category comprising a-political and favourable actors. One interviewee noted that '[l]egitimacy deficits are ultimately decentralised' (Interview, July 2024). While

5. See for example: Hirt (2015: 115-135); Belloni (2018: 55-73).



research to date shows no evidence that community-based assistance increases legitimacy for national authorities (Cliffe et al., 2023), it is a perpetual concern on European agencies' minds in their attempt to retain access and ensure continued impact of their operations.

An emerging factor has been the extension on the part of central governments in the Central Sahel of their political control over local and regional authorities, who are expected to follow government priorities.

This at times creates tensions with local authorities and has repercussions on European agencies who operate in this constantly evolving political arena. Developments such as these require fast coordination modalities, which can prove difficult in real time. For example, in Mali, the central government passed a law on non-cooperation with French NGOs. Mayors and local actors were strongly against the law, but had to implement it anyway. In response, however, there was no European coordination on the issue – as one interviewee put it, 'we simply left the French out in the cold' (Interview, July 2024).

3.4 CARVING OUT CAREFUL AND TAILORED EXCHANGES WITH CENTRAL GOVERNMENTS

The onus on local authorities is a reality for European agencies, who show a wealth of grounded practice in working with them. **This does not mean that European agencies no longer exchange with central governments** in the Central Sahel, where several agencies continue close cooperation with technical line ministries. Among the sectors mentioned most frequently are agriculture, water and energy. These sectors are where European agencies feel they have also gained credibility, not just with central governments and technical ministries, but also with local populations (Interview, August 2024). Health and education sectors were mentioned as emerging areas of work where European agencies are expanding their engagement, including by finding ways to include conflict-sensitive approaches aimed at supporting social cohesion.

However, even if this technical cooperation continues, addressing sectors and topics such as democracy, human rights and (good) governance is perceived by development practitioners as becoming increasingly more difficult in the absence of clear political directives by donor governments. There is a growing awareness

and vocalness about the need for national government buy-in and the need to align European agencies' programmes to national policies and priorities. While this is increasingly seen by development practitioners as crucial for the sustainability of the projects, in politically complex fragile settings, notably the Central Sahel, it is also the area of most tension between agencies and donor governments. While many donor governments continue to draw (different and varying) red lines on not engaging with central government, based on fears of being seen as legitimising unlawful or undemocratic regimes, European agencies are increasingly confronted with the limitations and the lack of political guidance and steering from European donor governments on how to engage with central governments. As Cliffe et al. (2023) note, to date there is little evidence that 'the provision of aid does significantly impact international or recipient populations' perceptions of national authorities'. Most development agency representatives noted explicitly that current collaboration with line ministries, especially on technical aspects of sectoral priorities, stands in contrast with the 'blockage' at the political and strategic level on how to engage with the current (military) leadership in the Central Sahel. They also note that central governments in the Central Sahel closely follow what international partners are doing, and regularly ask for exchanges on project results (Interview, October 2024).

Operating in fragile settings has also required European agencies to collaborate and coordinate differently amongst each and with other regional and international actors. One frequently mentioned example was the decision for several development actors and agencies to design regional programmes rather than only country-level programmes. The choice to move across various



There is a growing awareness and vocalness about the need for national government buy-in and the need to align European agencies' programmes to national policies and priorities.



levels of engagement, from regional to local, will require even stronger coordination, and continued investments to maintain granular knowledge of local developments even when operating at regional levels. The closed political setting in the Central Sahel, including the withdrawal of several donors, was also flagged as putting financial pressure on the objective (through Team Europe or otherwise) of working more closely together. Several interviewees for example pointed to the fact that they are asked to work together, but compete for the same (shrinking) funds.

Interviews suggest that the nature and extent of collaboration with the United Nations, which is faced with similar concerns on flexibility and adaptability of programming in fragile settings, is very context-dependent (Interviews, September & October 2024). The UN has set up Triple Nexus task forces, and is piloting Triple Nexus projects, including in the Central Sahel. Harking back to the need to strengthen shared information, joint analysis and coordination based on comparative advantages and local realities, one respondent noted that much too often, the EU perceives the UN as a competitor rather than a strategic ally (Interview, July 2024). In other settings, development and UN agencies have set up joint programmes, or collaborate in financing and organisations' donor coordination platforms. Given its very nature, the UN is less curtailed by geopolitical considerations and limitations by national capitals, and could function as a 'passerelle' for continued communication in politically constrained settings. The ongoing fragility assessment being conducted in Burkina Faso by UNDP, jointly with the African and Islamic Development Banks, could be a short-term opportunity to identify ways to strengthen the delivery of development cooperation in the Central Sahel. Making such assessments widely accessible and visible could further harness exchanges and collaboration across various development partners.

3.5 EMERGING PARTNERS AND 'NEW' ACTORS FOR EUROPEAN AGENCIES' OPERATIONS IN FRAGILE SETTINGS

While European agencies have extensive networks and experience in territorial approaches and working along local structures, their exposure and experience in working with humanitarian and peacebuilding actors is much more limited, posing challenges for the implementation of the HDP nexus (see also Chapter 2). Humanitarian actors have been present and active in the Central Sahel region for several decades across multiple sectors. But in some cases, European agencies' representatives have considered humanitarian actors or peacebuilding organisations as new actors in fragile and conflict-affected zones, perceiving them as 'having much more difficulties to get [our] level of access and networks' (Interview, September 2024).

In line with the EU's Global Gateway strategy, several European agencies have given more attention to private sector development (PSD), with a range of programmes and initiatives aimed at strengthening local economic development and PSD. For other agencies, support to local private sector development has been a pinnacle of their cooperation, focused on local PSD and support to local value chains. Cooperation with local private sectors is not new for European agencies. However, interviewees flagged the difficulty of bridging the interests of European private sector actors and local private sector actors (Interview, September 2024). The Global Gateway has emerged as a key conduit to serve European (private sector) interests, including trade and value chain corridors, but how this approach will be operationalised in fragile settings remains unclear. The following chapter will further explore this challenge.



4 A JOINT EUROPEAN APPROACH IN FRAGILE SETTINGS: TEAM EUROPE AND GLOBAL GATEWAY

4.1 THE STILL-RELUCTANT ENGAGEMENT WITH TEAM EUROPE: EMBRACED AS AN IDEA, YET LIMITED OPERATIONALISATION

The core idea underlying Team Europe, initially introduced during the pandemic to enhance coordination of Europe's global crisis response and later applied to various policy areas, is to strengthen cooperation among European actors through a unified approach. This concept, which also aims to increase the visibility and effectiveness of EU engagement, resonates deeply with and is strongly embraced by European agencies (Keijzer et al., 2021). While the concept has certainly improved cooperation between member states, its inherent flexibility also allows for various interpretations. As a result, the goals of increased visibility and effectiveness – as other studies have observed – can only be partially realised (Keijzer et al., 2023).

Our research findings indicate a strong support for Team Europe as a mindset among European agencies. This support is also true in the Central Sahel. Despite its shortcomings, the core idea of improved coordination behind Team Europe appears particularly important in fragile contexts where several national European agencies face extremely difficult situations. As several interviewees note, the Team Europe narrative certainly helped to provide new impetus for thinking and exchanging about closer cooperation between European actors engaged in these settings, including European agencies (Interviews, July–September 2024).

The Team Europe narrative seems to have sparked the establishment of some more informal coordination practices in the Central Sahelian countries. This said, it is unclear whether the examples interlocutors had in mind were actually inspired by Team Europe. One example, described by several interlocutors as very helpful, is the Practitioners Network group of European agencies operating in Burkina Faso, which was established in 2023 and facilitates regular coordination in a Team Europe spirit (Interview, September 2024).

To a large extent, ongoing Team Europe discussions are still considered as being too abstract and not tailored to the realities on the ground (Interview, September 2024). Some European agencies perceive Team Europe as competing with their own efforts, leading to direct orders from capitals to development agency representatives on the ground to refrain from participating in Team Europe discussions or to maintain a low profile (Interview, September 2024). While this is a well-known challenge that previous joint programming initiatives encountered as well, fostering integration among EU development actors is core to the Team Europe approach, and a threshold against which the instrument should be held to account.

A notable difference exists between small and large member states with substantial development cooperation apparatuses; the latter tend to be less enthusiastic about advancing the Team Europe approach, continuing to also view it as a vehicle to advance bilateral objectives (Interview, June 2024; Keijzer et al., 2021). In addition, the size of the share of

EU funding of a European agency's overall resource structure may affect an organisation's proclivity to prioritise coordination with European partners. Although hard data on this relationship is lacking, insights gathered from the interviews suggest a positive correlation between the EU funding an organisation receives and its attitudes toward Team Europe (Interview, July 2024).

To fully operationalise a Team Europe approach in fragile contexts, a strong political commitment to enhancing European coordination is required both at the EU leadership level and by member states (GIZ-Enabel expert-level workshop, 2024). In the Central Sahel, where European donors have varied in their decisions to either remain engaged or withdraw, establishing a unified Team Europe approach with the partner government is particularly challenging due to the wide divergence in member states' political goals. When political consensus is not possible, varying positions among member states should not prevent stronger coordination among those willing to work together. In such cases, forming ad hoc coalitions of willing member states and EU actors may be a viable option, as long as there is an understanding that differing positions by those who opt out will not undermine these efforts. Achieving this political understanding is crucial for making such a coordinated approach work.



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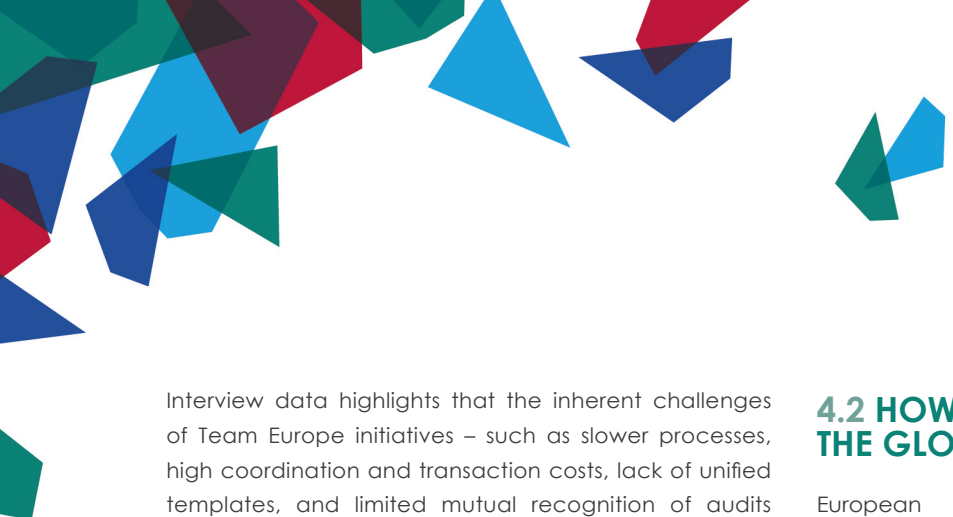
In practical terms, Team Europe did not always have a direct impact and was often viewed as a discourse primarily taking place in European capitals that has not been fully translated into tangible approaches in country contexts (GIZ-Enabel expert-level workshop, 2024). Additionally, the introduction of Team Europe has

been perceived by some practitioners as adding another bureaucratic layer, which has further complicated its acceptance and effectiveness (Interview, August 2024). Others see it as an institutionalisation of already existing practices (Interview, September 2024). While Team Europe may contribute to donor and implementer coordination, its presence is seldom felt in direct engagement, particularly with civil society in partner countries (GIZ-Enabel expert-level workshop, 2024).

The operationalisation of Team Europe also depends on its proactive facilitation and promotion by EU-level actors, i.e., the Directorate-General for International Partnerships (DG INTPA) at the headquarters level, and EU delegations at the country level. Interviewees reported new dynamism in recent months spurred by EU-level actors such as DG INTPA that have encouraged new Team Europe initiatives (TEIs) as well as a stronger results-orientation, also in communication (Interview, August 2024).

At the country level, EU delegations can play a leading role in facilitating a Team Europe approach. Our research findings suggest that the role of EU delegations is critical in fostering greater coordination among European actors in a given country context (GIZ-Enabel expert-level workshop, October 2024). However, as previous research on the implementation of TEIs suggests, delegations can only fulfil such an enhanced coordination role if they are endowed with additional resources and if this coordination function is made a priority in the allocation of tasks to staff members (Lundsgaarde et al., 2024).

At the same time, practical hurdles for a more effective operationalisation of Team Europe remain. One example is the area of information sharing and joint risk analysis. European agencies' representatives highlighted the need for closer coordination and regular exchanges in this area, as only through establishing a shared understanding of the situation in the country would joint action and closer coordination become possible (Interviews, July & August 2024). However, different organisations have different limits on the extent to which they can share sensitive information with other agencies, which can hamper creating a shared understanding of the situation in a country that would ultimately inspire joint action (Interviews, September 2024; GIZ-Enabel expert-level workshop, 2024).



Interview data highlights that the inherent challenges of Team Europe initiatives – such as slower processes, high coordination and transaction costs, lack of unified templates, and limited mutual recognition of audits – become even more pronounced in fragile contexts, where operations are already complex to implement. For effective collaboration and joint implementation among Team Europe actors, a clear political incentive may be essential (Interview, November 2024).

Another aspect that can hinder the full operationalisation of the Team Europe approach concerns the available set of European funding instruments. Interview partners emphasised that one challenge with regard to Team Europe Initiatives is that they do not come with dedicated budgets for joint implementation by several European actors. This represented their understanding and expectations of Team Europe, whereas in practice TEIs can take various forms and approaches, reflecting various degrees of ambition – which may or may not include joint implementation by some or all partners involved. While the proposed governance structure of TEI includes a management and a steering group, earlier research suggested that a stronger (and budgeted) support function might be necessary to effectively support the steering, management and overall coordination of TEIs (Jones & Sergejeff, 2022). Consequently, Team Europe Initiatives have largely fostered alignment between separately funded bilateral programmes by different European actors. As several interview partners stressed, there is deeper cooperation and coordination in a Team Europe manner when several donors and agencies engage in joint implementation of a programme funded through a joint budget. This also relates to the challenges of funding Triple Nexus actions discussed above (see Chapter 2).



One challenge with regard to Team Europe Initiatives is that they do not come with dedicated budgets for joint implementation by several European actors.



4.2 HOW TO INTEGRATE FRAGILITY IN THE GLOBAL GATEWAY STRATEGY?

European policy-makers are steadily prioritising geopolitical interests and shifting foreign policy away from long-standing values-based approaches. They are now focusing on transforming partnerships with the developing world – previously centred on poverty reduction – towards a more interest-driven alignment with European geopolitical and geo-economic goals. This reflects broader shifts in the global landscape, marked by intensifying power rivalries and heightened international competition. A notable development in this regard was the launch of the EU's Global Gateway, in December 2021, as the EU's flagship global connectivity strategy, based on five pillars (digital transformation, green energy, transport, education and health) and aimed at 'bringing together the full range of foreign, development and economic tools in a more strategic manner along with a win-win narrative' (Teevan & Bilal, 2023). These shifts have brought about a more profound reflection among EU institutions, actors and member states on the future of their wider international cooperation (Sherriff & Veron, 2024). This has been reinforced, with the objective set out in the political guidelines of the incoming European Commission, to shape a 'new economic foreign policy' for the European Union (European Commission, 2024).

Since its launch, the Global Gateway has become the flagship policy for the EU's external partnerships. It has gathered attention in policy discussions on how to strengthen the European financial offer to its external partners. This has spurred discussion on how to more effectively support private sector development initiatives in fragile settings, which is a considerable challenge due to the private sector's reluctance to become active in most such settings. This said, the discussions have been further accelerated by the decrease in public spending and investments and the need to look at different modalities beyond traditional bilateral cooperation funding.

As Global Gateway will receive accrued political attention from the next European Commission, experts have called for greater strategic direction, coordination and stronger linkages to Europe's domestic economic and political agenda, and development priorities (Bilal & Teevan, 2024). More fundamentally, however, there has been a growing awareness among EU policy-makers



More fundamentally, however, there has been a growing awareness among EU policy-makers that Global Gateway is not (yet) a viable strategy and offer, for and in fragile settings



that Global Gateway is not (yet) a viable strategy and offer, for and in fragile settings (Bilal & Teevan, 2024). As DG INTPA's Director-General Koen Doens mentioned in the European Parliament Committee on Development (DEVE) meeting in October 2024, Global Gateway's investment-driven approach may simply not be feasible in fragile contexts such as Afghanistan, Yemen or Mali (European Parliament, 2024c). Similarly, Commissioner-Designate Sikela in his written answers to the European Parliament's questionnaire emphasised that '[b]eyond Global Gateway, the EU should support a differentiated approach and remain engaged in fragile contexts', and maintain dedicated resources to engage in these settings (European Parliament, 2024a).

How Global Gateway is expected to build on the work of European agencies on local PSD remains unclear for policy-makers and practitioners alike. Here, it is crucial to clearly differentiate between efforts to continue promoting local private sector development, and discussions on how to mobilise European private sector actors. In fragile settings, mobilising (European) private sectors remains a tall order, requiring a huge, and possibly unaffordable, amount of de-risking (GIZ-Enabel expert-level workshop, 2024). Already in 2021, the Practitioners Network noted the need to invest in regular exchanges with European Development Finance Institutions (Practitioners Network, 2021). However, interlocutors and experts note that linkages between European financial institutions and the Global Gateway's macro-level approach, European private sector actors and local private sector actors, initiatives and ecosystems can be reinforced. Recent research shows room to reinforce the capacity of EU delegations to strengthen these connections (Bilal & Teevan, 2024). This gap between local PSD and the Global Gateway

also means there is currently no buy-in from local partners into Global Gateway. Experts and practitioners were also generally critical about the real interest among European private sector actors, and pointed to the mismatch in risk analysis by different development, political and private sector actors (GIZ-Enabel expert-level workshop, 2024).

In early 2024, the European Commission presented the so-called 360-degree approach to implement Global Gateway, which gives more prominence to required investments in the 'enabling environment', e.g., education, skills, research, regulatory frameworks and good governance. So far, this approach is embryonic and requires considerably more attention and clear guidance to roll-out and implement effectively. Experts and practitioners have raised concerns about the decreasing levels of funding and shrinking space to work on governance issues in fragile settings, and the need for an enabling environment for (Global Gateway) investments. The incoming European Commission President has pledged 'to take the Global Gateway to the next level' (European Commission, 2024). At the same time, as mentioned above, the Commissioners-Designate Jozef Sikela and Hadja Lahbib have been tasked to work on a Commission-wide approach to fragility. Many questions remain, on who will lead the development of this fragility approach, what this will mean for the Global Gateway in fragile contexts, how it will be funded (including under the next EU budget 2028 to 2034) and how the EU's activities will be monitored and adapted.

There are examples of Global Gateway flagship projects being implemented in fragile settings, including Somalia, Chad, Burundi and the Democratic Republic of Congo. To date, there have been very few Global Gateway projects launched in the Central Sahel.⁶ As a recent report notes, 'implementing the Global Gateway strategy in politically estranged settings nevertheless presents many challenges, in particular the mobilisation of EU private investments, even with the use of EFSD+ guarantees' (Kacen, 2024). But interviews also suggest that it is not clear whether the Global Gateway is currently perceived as a competing offer, by national governments in the Central Sahel. Many governments are inclined to make use of the multitude of offers to advance their own

6. In 2023, Niger received a €66 million investment for education and youth, under the Global Gateway Africa-EU investment package. This, but also a range of other projects, was eventually suspended following the coup on 26 July 2023. See als

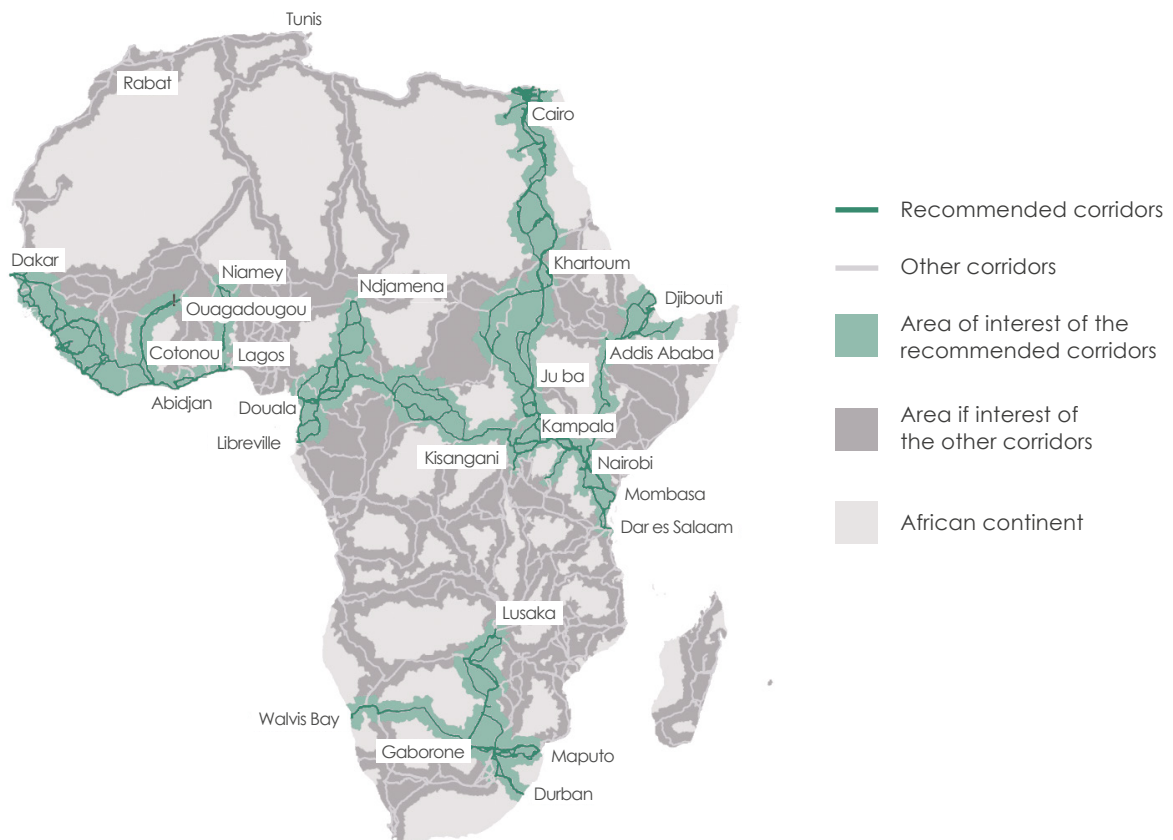


national interest. Several have established growing security partnerships with geopolitical competitors, such as Russia, which are currently focused on combating the expansion of violent terrorist groups (Lebovich, 2024). Others have turned to partners in the Gulf region, China or Turkey for infrastructure partnerships. Whether and how these different partnerships can be further expanded congruently, remains a big question mark.

Experts and practitioners raised several examples of concrete attention to the reality of fragile settings lacking in the implementation of Global Gateway flagship projects, in particular with regard to the planned 'strategic corridors' in West Africa (see map 1) (European Commission, 2022a). These corridors are aimed at connecting countries, including between coastal countries and the Central Sahel, and are meant

to 'support the creation of strategic, sustainable and secure transport corridors and support value chains, services and jobs that can benefit industries in both Africa and Europe'. In practice, discussions on how to incorporate fragile and conflict-affected settings into these corridors are stalled on the ground, with insufficient exchanges between EU delegations in place, the absence of joint fragility or political economy analysis, and missed opportunities on identifying joint collaboration, including as Team Europe with European agencies, on how to integrate fragile border regions into these planned corridors (Interview, October 2024). This confirms a sense raised by several interviewees operating in the Central Sahel region, about the lack of political priority given to addressing the Global Gateway based on a shared regional strategy, among European ambassadors and delegations.

Map 1: Planned strategic corridors under the EU Global Gateway





5 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In a context of rising global levels of fragility, engaging in fragile settings has become the new normal for many agencies of European international cooperation. These agencies have developed a modus operandi in these settings, underpinned by a range of tools and approaches to engage in such settings effectively – from which a wealth of lessons can be drawn. **Our research findings point to several conclusions from mapping such engagements and experiences.**

One overarching conclusion is that ‘staying engaged’ is not a sustainable strategy in and of its own, if not accompanied by clear political guidance, and will not suffice to respond to the range and extent of needs in fragile settings, in the long term. The various European agencies that have stayed active in fragile settings have applied a modus operandi built on their expertise, knowledge and local access. In the Central Sahel however, this is currently done with a very limited engagement with central governments – but to respond to structural challenges, this is deemed in most cases not a viable approach in the long term.

For the Central Sahel specifically, and based on a warning of the risks of walking away from the region, experts have increasingly called upon European actors to assess different options to re-establish communications and diplomatic relations with military regimes, (really) learn from past failures and overhaul their communication (both to European and external audiences) with regard to strategic objectives for the region (Brown, 2024). In the countries of the Central Sahel, which are deemed politically complex settings, European agencies are facing limitations of what they can achieve. While they have aimed to carve out a careful exchange with (parts of) central governments, the absence of clear political guidance, matched with adequate resources to engage in such settings, is a mounting obstacle.

Given the current geopolitical trends, EU member states and development partners will find it hard to pursue strategic interests such as security and migration management in these countries without working with the central government in one way or another. The governments of the Central Sahel have extended their partnerships with a wide range of actors, including the Gulf states, China, Russia and Turkey. As Europe pauses its security cooperation, it risks losing sight of the political leverage and capital that may be gained from continued and consistent cooperation on key areas of strategic interest for governments in the Central Sahel, including agriculture, water, but also health, education and infrastructure. This underlines that serious thought needs to be given to how the Global Gateway can be translated to regional and local realities, beyond flagship projects, and to make it a viable basis for mutually beneficial partnerships.

From the approach applied by European agencies in fragile settings, a range of experiences have been developed. First, European agencies have spent considerable efforts to rethink their engagements in fragile settings, adapting policies to respond to heightened insecurity (through security risk analysis and risk management as well as strategic human resource management); but also, by aiming to strengthen a Triple Nexus approach. Such approaches are deemed essential, but continue to be difficult to operationalise on the ground. This has also included carving out careful dialogue and partnerships with technical ministries in settings where political relations between partner and European governments have become fraught.

Second, agencies have aimed to strengthen partnerships and collaboration with a range of key partners. In fragile settings, much attention has gone



to (further) supporting locally led development and working (more closely) with local authorities and local organisations, including varying interest groups (youth, women and diaspora). In most cases, local networks and partners are far from new for European agencies, and form the pinnacle of their access, knowledge, trust relationship and credibility.

Third, European actors have aimed to strengthen their coordination by aiming to reinforce the Team Europe spirit – with varying degrees of success. Team Europe is seen as a welcome and much-needed mindset, but to a large extent remains inconsequential as an effective driver for more joined-up collaboration in fragile settings – with experts calling for a less complex process to operate more flexibly and rapidly in such settings. The push for a reinforcement of the EU's Global Gateway approach, which will define much of the EU's external engagement for the next European Commission, further poses questions around the viability of this approach in fragile settings.

At the end of 2024, a new European Commission will take office, which will be mandated to further finetune the roll-out of the Global Gateway, including in fragile and politically complex settings. The Commissioner for International Partnerships, Jozef Síkela, has been tasked to develop 'differentiated' approaches to 'least developed countries' on the one hand, in close collaboration with the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Vice-President of the European Commission. Hadja Lahbib, the incoming Commissioner for Preparedness, Crisis Management and Equality has been tasked to develop a 'Commission-wide integrated strategy on fragility' on the other hand. Further, as of January 2025, negotiations on the next EU Multiannual Financial Framework will take place, a key moment to define how the EU will bring all of its instruments and partnerships together in a unified approach to advance the EU's role in addressing fragile contexts on a global scale.

In this context, we have developed recommendations for the EU, its member states and European agencies on how to operate more effectively in fragile settings.

RECOMMENDATIONS

IN THE CENTRAL SAHEL, SPECIFICALLY:

1

For the EU writ large, including the European Commission, EU member states and European agencies, there is, at the very least, a growing need to consider closely the challenges, risks and limitations of not cooperating or reducing cooperation with central governments in the Central Sahel. The absence of clear political guidelines, or a shared European position or strategy towards the region, risks undermining the sustainability of interventions, as sustainable impacts can be difficult to achieve if there is no follow-up on projects by national governments. More fundamentally, **if European agencies are in reality mandated to stay engaged in these complex and very volatile settings, the political objectives of this continued engagement must be clearly and more explicitly voiced and defined by their donor governments.**

For any engagement, this should also include a clear communication on the limitations currently faced in the absence of a clear European position and joint strategy; but also building a clear narrative on the risks of disengaging. This will require a realistic assessment of potentials and limits of the impact of the engagement in the short to medium term. But this political guidance to European agencies is even more important in fragile settings than in other contexts, and is key to their being able to fulfil their mission most effectively as well as for communicating effectively to the broader public why they are staying engaged. **Simultaneously, EU institutions and member states should develop a joint position on staying engaged in the region,** which includes a clarification of shared political objectives of European engagement in the Central Sahel that all EU actors can subscribe to, but which also allows EU member states to take differentiated approaches concerning their individual engagement in the region.

Going beyond the focus on the Central Sahel, some recommendations tailored to the European agencies (and other implementing partners) have emerged, while others apply to engagement in fragile contexts more generally.

THE EUROPEAN AGENCIES FOR INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION:

2

Should continue to strengthen their expertise and capacity to conduct in-depth and granular context and conflict analyses in order to fully understand local contexts and to identify the right cooperation partners at different levels. This will require further building up sufficient analysis capacities **within** European agencies (i.e., increasing expertise and financial resources for analysis) as well as mechanisms to share relevant information and analysis **across** European agencies and donor governments, in a Team Europe spirit (see point 6 below). In addition, this also includes continuing to adopt financial risk management, and further investing in long-term, strategic human resource management with a focus on local staffing.

3

Should, in strong collaboration with the European Commission as well as EU delegations, reinforce their support for locally led approaches to development in fragile settings. To further build differentiated understanding of the constellation of actors at the local level, including various interest groups such as women, youth and diaspora, the abovementioned capacity for analysis and intelligence gathering is key. Likewise, while it is key to increase cooperation with civil society, Eurocentric understandings of who makes up 'civil society' should be avoided in fragile contexts – or for that matter, in general. Instruments to support local civil society actors, but also peacebuilding organisations, should be carefully designed, based on a thorough understanding of the CSOs landscape, with flexible instruments and right-sized funding measures. However, in politically complex settings, sustaining support to local authorities and/or local civil society should not be presented as a coping strategy, for example while military regimes are in place, but should rather be part and parcel of a long-term strategy in fragile settings more broadly.

Next we have recommendations for the EU actors at large, in order to engage in fragile contexts more effectively and in a Team Europe spirit:

4

The European Commission, EU delegations and European agencies should continue to seek effective information sharing and coordination mechanisms. To inform a joint European approach, an effective and diverse platform for sharing conflict and context analysis at the country level (e.g., led by EU delegations), and to facilitate sharing regular updates with EU donors, European agencies and international partners (INGOs), could create some basis for stronger EU-wide coordination. This continues to be flagged as a necessity, but without clear political guidelines and dedicated resources this will remain a dead letter. There are emerging practices of more purposefully identifying comparative advantages, such as national practitioners' networks.

Such increased coordination should also lead to actually doing more together, in terms of joint planning and implementation, using joint funding and conducting joint monitoring and evaluation, and really building on the strengths of individual agencies and donors. In contexts of increasing fragility and instability, more efforts are needed from all European agencies to concentrate their geographic and thematic engagements on areas that can really add value, based on their level of access, networks, different toolboxes, varying levels of flexibility and adaptation, and complementarity – so as to avoid blind spots.



5

All EU actors, including EU delegations, member states and the European Commission, in close collaboration with European agencies and other development actors on the ground, should invest the necessary efforts to develop an integrated and multidimensional understanding of fragility that can inform all of the EU's engagements in fragile settings, including through Global Gateway. The anticipated Commission-wide integrated approach to fragility should cross the humanitarian-development-peace divide, and identify clear impact pathways for all EU actors and institutions, based on their comparative advantages, distinct roles and mandates, combined with continued efforts to integrate responses in fragile settings.

Global Gateway will only be a 'return on investment' for all partners involved, if designed based on mutual interest, a granular understanding of local contexts, demands and shared risk (assessments). In the implementation of Global Gateway flagship projects such as the 'strategic corridors' in West Africa, concrete attention needs to be paid to the reality of fragile settings and how to utilise those projects for addressing root causes of fragility in those contexts. Likewise, Global Gateway projects need to be designed in such a way that they reduce the risk of contributing to or even driving increased levels of fragility.

6

The EU, in particular the European Commission, in close collaboration with EU member states governments, should carefully consider the suitability of current EU instruments to respond to fragile settings and identify appropriate changes, based on past lessons learned. The launch of negotiations on the next Multi-Annual Financial (MFF) Framework, as of January 2025, constitutes a pivotal moment to build on existing practices, lessons learned and opportunities to strengthen the EU's approach in fragile settings; and to consider how this can strengthen the EU's effectiveness, credibility and global reputation. A wealth of experience, including what has not worked, exists across the EU, EU member states and European agencies. This should inform the next EU MFF and related EU toolbox that will be used to implement the expected EU integrated approach on fragility. Flexibility, coordination, longevity but also close monitoring should be key elements to design the next budget, and should be accompanied with the right political strategy and fitting toolbox.

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