

“Staying engaged as Team Europe in fragile settings”

ETTG Collective Report – Executive Summary

Fragile contexts face vulnerabilities on multiple fronts, and in heightened intensity. They are characterized by weak state and societal capacities to manage and absorb various risks, including conflicts, climate events, and economic distress, and a limited resilience to prepare for future shocks. However, fragility is about more than weak (state and societal) capacity, and while it increases the risks of (intra- and inter-communal) conflict, most of 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).

European actors have sought to mitigate the impact of fragility through humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding efforts. 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. European agencies¹ operating in fragile contexts are caught in the middle of these strategic changes. While engaging in fragile settings has become the new normal for many of them, they find themselves navigating conflicting geopolitical priorities from their national governments and the EU, which can fuel perceptions of disunity; they apply financial instruments that may not always be fit for purpose in fragile settings; and they have to balance humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding efforts, while ensuring the sustainability of their development actions in increasingly volatile environments.

Recognising the changing nature and the increasing fragility of some contexts, the EU, many EU member states and European agencies have called for more strategic (political and operational) engagement in fragile contexts. However, European actors are far from reaching a shared European consensus on how (and if) to remain engaged in such contexts. For example, not all donors and European agencies see staying engaged in the Central Sahel as a given, and some European actors have decided to leave the region altogether for different reasons, such as high costs of continuous engagement, or shifted political priorities, or a perception that they could no longer have positive and long-lasting development impacts.

Rather than 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. In particular, our research finds that **‘staying engaged’ is not a sustainable strategy in and of its own, if not accompanied by clear political guidance.**

This is particularly the case for the Central Sahel, where European agencies are facing limitations of what they can achieve. While they have aimed to carve out a careful exchange with (parts of) central

¹ 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.

governments, the absence of clear political guidance, matched with adequate resources to engage in such settings, is a mounting obstacle. 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. 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 governments of the Central Sahel, especially when they have extended their partnerships with a wide range of actors, including the Gulf states, China, Russia and Turkey. EU actors need to (really) learn from past failures, and have a clear communication (both to European and external audiences) with regard to strategic objectives for the region.

Our research also finds that European agencies have spent considerable efforts to rethink their engagements in fragile settings, by adapting policies to respond to heightened insecurity (through security risk analysis and risk management as well as strategic human resource management); by aiming to strengthen a humanitarian-development-peace nexus (Triple Nexus) approach; and by carving out careful dialogue and partnerships with technical ministries in settings where political relations between partner and European governments have become fraught.

Agencies have also aimed to strengthen partnerships and collaboration with a range of key partners, 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 organisations are not new partners for European agencies, but rather form the pinnacle of their access, knowledge, trust relationship and credibility.

For what concerns European actors more at large, while they have sought to strengthen coordination through the Team Europe approach, its effectiveness in fragile settings remains limited. Team Europe is seen as a welcome and much-needed mindset, but it still does not represent 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 new European Commission taking office at the end of 2024 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 Sikela, has been tasked to develop ‘differentiated’ approaches to ‘least developed countries’ on the one hand, while 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. This, together with negotiations on the next EU Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) that will take place as of January 2025, are key moments 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, our recommendations for the EU, its member states and European agencies on how to operate more effectively in fragile settings include:

1. **In the Central Sahel specifically**, 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.

With regard to fragile settings 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 analysis in order to fully understand local contexts and to identify the right cooperation partners at different levels.** This should happen within and across European agencies, in order to have mechanisms to share relevant information and analysis in a Team Europe spirit. Additionally, robust financial risk management and long-term human resource strategies, particularly emphasizing local staffing, are essential for sustainable and impactful interventions;
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.** This requires a deep understanding of local actors, including diverse interest groups (such as women, youth and diaspora), and avoiding Eurocentric perspectives on civil society. Supporting local civil society organizations and peacebuilding initiatives should be based on thorough assessments and flexible funding mechanisms. While such support is crucial, it should not be seen as a temporary measure but rather as a long-term commitment to sustainable development in fragile contexts.

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.** This continues to be flagged as a necessity, but without clear political guidelines and dedicated resources this will remain a dead letter. 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 individual strengths of individual agencies and donors;
5. **All EU actors, including EU delegations, member states and the European Commission, in close collaboration with European agencies, 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.** In the implementation of Global Gateway flagship projects, concrete attention needs to be paid to the reality of fragile settings and how to utilise those projects for addressing root causes of fragility. Likewise, Global Gateway projects need to be designed in a way that they reduce the risk of them 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.** The upcoming negotiations on the EU's MFF offer a crucial opportunity to do so. Key elements for the next MFF discussions include flexibility, coordination, long-term commitment, and robust monitoring. This should be accompanied by a clear political strategy and a well-suited toolbox to address the complex challenges of fragile contexts.