



SUMMARY REPORT

EXPERT ROUNDTABLE

“The EU’s Comprehensive Approach in External Conflict and Crisis: from Strategy to Practice”

12 February 2014

Hosted by the
Multinational Development Policy Dialogue of
Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung
&
CARE International

Conference venue

Residence Palace
Rue de la Loi 155
1040 Brussels
Maelbeek room



Introduction

In October 2013, CARE and the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung organized a first expert roundtable on the EU Comprehensive Approach (CA), discussing the issue from the perspective of the trade off between a comprehensive and a principled approach and its consequences for the humanitarian assistance provided by the EU and civil society organisations. At the roundtable, experts agreed that there is a need for further coordination among EU institutions and other actors working to address crises situations. Some concerns were expressed by the humanitarian community regarding the potentially negative consequences that this CA could have on humanitarian operations in the field. Given that the humanitarian principles are respected, the EU CA could not only improve the capacity of the EU to engage more effectively in international crises but also to achieve appropriate, longer-term, human rights-based solutions to complex situations and lasting peace and security for the communities most affected.

However, as the EU CA policy was still in process of development when this first roundtable took place, the discussion focused on the theoretical consequences of the possible choices to be taken by the EU in the conceptualisation of its official approach. In December 2013, the EEAS and EC finally presented the long-awaited Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council [Join(2013) 30 final] on the EU's Comprehensive Approach to external conflicts and crises. The concept as such had already been applied in recent crisis situations in the Horn of Africa and the Sahel. For this reason it was timely to move from the theoretical to the practical side of discussions of the EU CA. In this context, in February 2014, the second expert roundtable organised jointly by CARE International and Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung "The EU's Comprehensive Approach in External Conflict and Crisis: from Strategy to Practice" focused on the practical implementation of the new approach and addressed the challenges that the EU faces in the implementation of the CA.

The present report summarizes the two main topics discussed during the expert roundtable: (1) the preconditions for preventive action, the development of a common and strategic vision and timely intervention in crisis situations, and (2) the practical implementation of the EU Comprehensive Approach, with special attention to the lessons that can be drawn from the recent and current experiences in Syria and in the Central African Republic.



Preconditions for preventive action, the development of a common and strategic vision and timely intervention

The establishment of a Comprehensive Approach is viewed as a fundamental step in addressing the lack of an overall strategy shared by all actors within the EU. Currently, due to a lack of a common understanding among the European Commission, the European External Action Service and the Council of the European Union, there exist multiple strategies and a general lack of efficiency in dealing with the security-political-humanitarian nexus. Taking into consideration the leading role of the EU in development and humanitarian aid and the significant amount of resources that the EU makes available in crisis situations, there is an undeniable need to improve coordination and effectiveness in the implementation of EU instruments. From an internal and an external perspective, the EU needs to clarify the process of decision-making related to the deployment of its resources and better define the roles of all the participants involved in a common response.

The experts at the meeting agreed that the Communication on the EU Comprehensive Approach represents a positive initiative towards improving EU coordination and efficiency - especially in the context of the relatively new European External Action Service, which has necessitated new ways of working and interacting among EU Institutions. It is a first important step that focuses on the sharing of information and coordination among the European Institutions, and has the potential significantly to increase EU's effectiveness in crisis management. Although more information and better knowledge do not necessarily automatically translate into better decision-making, it is important for the actors involved in the decision-making process to have access to clear, shared levels of information and awareness of the instruments available. In addition, since the Lisbon Treaty came into effect, it has been necessary to build a new common working culture among the EU institutions and Member States. In this context, the EU CA provides an important basis for institutionalising new ways of working. One approach has been the organisation of inter-institutional workshops with representatives from the different DGs, member states and partner institutions concerned in order to promote a common understanding of competencies and build capacity to create better and faster responses to crisis situations.

The participants stressed that the Communication on the EU Comprehensive Approach is not as important as the trust-building process behind its



conceptualisation. It would be premature to think that from this Communication the EU will move immediately to the elaboration of a joint action plan. At the moment the focus must be put on the improvement of the collaboration among European Commission, the EEAS, EU member states and relevant external organisations.

The importance of conflict prevention and early warning systems was highlighted as critical for a successful EU approach to crisis management. The EU is currently implementing a pilot programme in the Sahel region to establish a crisis early warning system. The challenge faced by the relevant EU Institutions is that in practice it is only politically possible to mobilize resources when a crisis situation actually takes place. In this sense, an effective EU CA that improves coordination and sharing of information among EU Institutions can support EU actors to react rapidly to a crisis, influence or take the necessary political decisions, and deploy the appropriate instruments in time to contain the crisis.

Using the full range of EU tools and instruments to craft a flexible and effective response: Lessons learned – Syria and Central African Republic

The second panel of the event looked particularly at the current crises in the Central African Republic (CAR) and in Syria. The panellists presented the situation in CAR as an almost overlooked crisis. Although the process of destabilisation in the country started in December 2012 and representatives from the EU, EU member states, and the US had a shared understanding that a *coupe d'état* was imminent, no political action was taken and the situation escalated into a crisis. Only in December 2013 the EU recognised the situation of emergency in the country and established an EU mission to address the crisis. At this stage the insurgency in CAR had already developed into a full scale civil war of ethno-religious character. What has been missing from the EU's response to the situation in CAR is the political driving force to take preemptive and sufficient action, and the slow and relatively limited EU response has demonstrated that the EU still has to improve its collective preventive action capacity and develop more unified commitment to address "forgotten" crises.

Concerning the crisis in Syria, the overall evaluation from the experts is that the EU underestimated the complexity and magnitude of the crisis. In March 2011, at the beginning of the Arab Spring, the region was living a transformative impetus and just some months later in July 2011 the EU was



asking for Assad to go. It is now believed that it was a mistake for the EU to push for regime change up-front. Currently, the Syria crisis is creating the biggest movement of conflict-related refugees since Rwanda. The EU, in its application of the CA and reaction to the crisis is still not as effective as it could be as a global player. One key challenge for the EU remains ensuring strong coordination between political, development, and humanitarian efforts, while maintaining the clear separation of mandates among its different actors. Even though the CA sets out the specificities of EU humanitarian response, there remains the potential for perceptions of overlap - if not overlap in practice -between political and humanitarian efforts. Furthermore, in Syria, while the EU is attempting through the CA to address humanitarian and development needs in a comprehensive way, the complexity of the crisis and the conflicting perspectives of the different EU actors involved makes this particularly difficult. The question is whether the EU and its member states are sufficiently aligned to mobilise enough political leverage and resources to effect real change to the situation on the ground? It seems that even with the CA, the EU lacks a unified approach to Syria, impeding efforts to implement a strategy that can effectively address the complex nature of the situation.

Conclusions

A number of lessons can be learned from the discussions held in the two panels of the event to craft a flexible and effective comprehensive EU strategy for addressing crises. Firstly, that the Comprehensive Approach is not merely a framework to improve coordination within the EU. The engagement with member states and other stakeholders such as the United Nations is an essential part of this concept for joint action. Furthermore, it should be stressed that the dialogue with civil society organisations is at the centre of a successful Comprehensive Approach. It is also necessary to avoid blurred lines and to preserve the distinction between humanitarian and political actors on the one hand and on the other hand to develop communication and long term strategies for engagement with all stakeholders, including civil society, host governments and local communities. Although the Joint Communication on the EU Comprehensive Approach is an important document, it is fundamental that all the actors involved build on it. It is time to move towards a joint action strategy.

Secondly, it is important to recognise that "security", and not merely resources, is the biggest limitation for intervention in a crisis. The key challenge in a crisis situation is to maintain basic social services and to



guarantee salaries in order to ensure governments remain operational at a minimum level and to guarantee minimum living standards for the civil population. This cannot be ignored by actors involved in a comprehensive approach to crisis management. An efficient comprehensive approach must be a conceptual framework that can be deployed in all cases, independently of the magnitude of the crisis, and focused essentially on the well-being of the civil population.

Lastly, by looking into the EU reaction to the crises in the CAR and in Syria, it can be stated that through improved coordination among EU and other actors and sensitivity to specific mandates, the EU is making clear efforts to implement a comprehensive approach that addresses the security and long-term resilience of the communities most affected by a crisis situation while respecting humanitarian principles. However, the EU still faces challenges in aligning its approaches and strategies across not only EU Institutions but also member states. In the context of both crises, it will be extremely important for the EU to learn from its mistakes and improve its capacity to react to political, military, and humanitarian crises in a joined up, unified way in order for it to play a meaningful and effective role in the global arena.