The Future Funding of Sustainable Development in Fragile and Conflict-Affected States

September 2026

dóchas

PRESIDENCY PROJECT IE LT EL

Funded by the European Union

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With thanks to Bernardo Mariani, Conflict Management Consulting (CMC), for drafting this policy paper and to Casey Kelso for support with editing.

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Executive Summary

Conflict is on the rise, while weak institutions, displacement and repeated political and economic crises pose major challenges. They disproportionately affect fragile and conflict-affected states (FCAS)[1] with limited resilience capacities, driving poverty and humanitarian needs. In fragile settings, recurrent and increasingly severe climate-related shocks add another layer to these challenges, exacerbating existing vulnerabilities and conflict pressures while also affecting livelihoods, resilience and displacement. At the same time, development finance is declining in several major donor countries and is increasingly expected to serve geopolitical, economic and security objectives alongside development goals. The result is not simply less development finance but a changing set of priorities that will influence where and how international resources are allocated.

For the European Union (EU) and its partner countries, these changes come at an important moment. Negotiations on the 2028–2034 Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) are taking place as the EU seeks to strengthen its competitiveness and economic security, deepen strategic partnerships and mobilise investment through the Global Gateway initiative. These objectives are legitimate. The question is how they will shape the future allocation and design of development finance, particularly in countries where humanitarian, development and peace needs are high, but commercial or geopolitical returns are limited.

The proposed MFF, including a 200 billion euro (€) Global Europe Instrument for EU cooperation with third countries, offers an opportunity to maintain and strengthen the EU's global role, but its design will matter greatly for fragile contexts. More flexibility could help the EU respond to changing circumstances and reduce administrative fragmentation but it could also weaken predictability and make longer-term development priorities more vulnerable to changing political demands. Therefore, the issue is not simply whether the next MFF should be more flexible, but where that flexibility sits and who benefits from it. Fragile contexts need flexibility to respond to changing conditions, but they also need longer time horizons, predictable international financing and the ability to sustain on-the-ground engagement where political or commercial incentives are weak.

Getting the right mix is also an issue given the growing use of guarantees, blended finance and investment-led approaches. These instruments can mobilise additional resources and have an important role in many partner countries. But they are not a substitute for grants where poverty, weak institutions and political risk make commercial investment difficult. Basic services, institutional capacity, local infrastructure, peacebuilding and gender equality are among the most important areas of investment in fragile settings while offering limited opportunities for private investors. The question is therefore not whether the EU should choose between grants and investment, but ensuring the financing mix is able to respond adequately to the political, institutional and economic conditions of each setting. The Global Gateway should remain one tool among several and not become the default framework for engagement in fragile contexts.

The evidence collected for this paper suggests that the EU already has much of the policy architecture needed to address these challenges, in particular through the Integrated Approach to Fragility and the Humanitarian–Development–Peace (HDP) nexus. The European Commission's (EC's) own analysis, however, shows that implementation remains inconsistent. Joint analysis, complementary financing and the integration of peacebuilding are still difficult in practice, while approaches that have worked in certain contexts have often proved difficult to scale. Similarly, the May 2026 conclusions of the Council of the European Union on fragility, EU external action and sustainable development stress the need for a stronger, more coordinated and long-term approach to fragility based on the HDP nexus. The central challenge for the next MFF is therefore not an absence of policy frameworks and commitments, but making them work in practice.

This is as much an institutional problem as a financing problem. The EU currently directs a relatively small share of its external financing to fragile contexts, and allocating more funding to these settings could make a significant difference. The test of the Integrated Approach to Fragility will ultimately be at the country level. Greater flexibility in Brussels will have limited effect if EU Delegations do not have the resources needed, particularly in terms of staff, expertise, and local knowledge, to understand changing political contexts, coordinate across HDP dimensions, and give meaningful leadership to local actors.

The civil society organisations (CSOs) consulted for this paper differ in emphasis, but their expressed concerns converge around several issues. That is, the financing system is in danger of:

- diluting development and humanitarian objectives within a more geopolitical external action agenda;
- losing financing that is both predictable and sufficiently flexible;
- providing 'one-size-fits-all' financing;
- over-relying on investment-led approaches and blended finance in fragile environments;
- undermining the role of local actors; and
- downgrading conflict prevention and peacebuilding.

There is also a particular concern that a financing system geared towards visible outputs and acute crises can systematically underinvest in interventions whose success lies in preventing conflict, displacement or deterioration.

For fragile contexts, therefore, the next MFF should not be judged only by the size of the Global Europe budget envelope. The more important questions are what gets funded, where, through which instruments, with what safeguards, and according to whose priorities. Supporting locally led approaches is a key part of this question. Local organisations need to be involved not only as implementing partners, but in assessing needs, setting priorities, designing programmes and evaluating results. Greater direct funding matters, but so does giving local actors a meaningful role in decisions about how EU resources are used. Similarly, performance frameworks need to look beyond what is easiest to count. Resilience, institutional capacity, gender equality, inclusion, social cohesion and conflict prevention can take years to develop and may be poorly captured by short-term financial or infrastructure indicators. What the EU measures will influence what receives attention and resources.

This paper therefore proposes ten priorities for the next MFF:

1. Do not treat fragile contexts as one homogeneous category. Differentiate grants, investment, budget support and technical assistance according to the local context.
2. Keep development objectives at the centre of Global Europe. Make poverty eradication and sustainable development key objectives.
3. Make conflict sensitivity a condition for EU external action. Apply conflict-sensitive approaches across EU-funded programmes and inform them through analysis of political, conflict, gender and climate risks.
4. Protect grants as a key financing mechanism. Keep grants available where commercial investment is least viable, while using investment instruments where they can add value.
5. Do not position Global Gateway as the default approach in fragile contexts. Ensure that investment and strategic interests do not override development and rights objectives, and use a mix of instruments suited to each context, including governance support, peacebuilding, local development, political engagement and, where appropriate, public private investment.
6. Give gender-sensitive conflict prevention and peacebuilding a secure place in EU funding. Reflect them systematically in EU geographic programming and performance evaluation frameworks, rather than relying primarily on small thematic funding windows.
7. Protect a predictable humanitarian baseline of funding while retaining flexibility. Combine reliable humanitarian funding with flexible resources that can be mobilised when needs change, while protecting principled humanitarian action.
8. Give local actors a meaningful say throughout EU-funded projects. Involve local actors in priority-setting, decision-making, implementation and evaluation, while providing more direct and accessible funding and simpler application procedures.

9. Ensure that the Integrated Approach to Fragility and the HDP nexus work in practice. Address imbalances within the nexus, pursue more effective joined-up approaches, and provide resources and incentives for country-level analysis, coordination and engagement.
10. Measure long-term qualitative outcomes, not only what is easiest to count, including changes in resilience, institutional capacity, inclusion, social cohesion and conflict prevention alongside conventional financial and infrastructure indicators.

For Ireland, the 2026 Presidency of the Council of the EU provides an opportunity to use its political influence and credibility to propose solutions to these issues during the MFF negotiations. Ireland is unlikely to have the greatest influence through detailed technical amendments alone. Its contribution can instead focus on building support among Member States for reframing development and HDP nexus approaches as investments in global stability and security and for creating accountability for the implementation of the HDP nexus and the Integrated Approach to Fragility. This would require a financing architecture that protects development objectives, recognises differences between contexts, and leaves space for humanitarian action, peace-building, and locally led approaches. It means defending development objectives in the Global Europe Regulation, resisting Global Gateway as the default approach, strengthening links across humanitarian, development, peace, and climate action without compromising principles, and ensuring civil society and local actors have a meaningful place in decisions about EU financing.

European external action is at a critical juncture. The real test is whether the EU can adapt to a more geopolitical environment without losing a context- and needs-based, principled approach. The Integrated Approach to Fragility provides a basis for doing this.

What is now needed is not another layer of policy commitments, but concrete financing arrangements, institutional capacity, and accountability mechanisms that allow existing commitments to be implemented and make a practical difference. The choices made in the next MFF will help determine whether the EU remains able and willing to invest in the institutions, relationships, and capacities that enable societies to manage conflict and shocks over time, thus benefiting partner countries and Europe's own long-term stability and security.

Recommendations to the EU

REC 1	**Do not treat fragile contexts as one homogeneous category** The MFF should recognise that different forms and degrees of fragility require different approaches to financing.	**Why:** What works in a relatively stable country with functioning institutions will not necessarily work in a conflict-affected country with weak state capacity.
REC 2	**Keep development objectives at the centre of Global Europe** Poverty eradication, sustainable development, and addressing inequalities should remain clearly embedded in the legal framework of the Global Europe Instrument.	**Why:** Clear objectives matter when competing political and economic priorities influence funding decisions. They give the European Parliament, Member States, and civil society a basis for holding the EU to its development commitments.
REC 3	**Make conflict sensitivity a condition for EU external action** Conflict sensitivity should be mandatory across EU external action and inform decisions throughout the project cycle. In fragile and conflict-affected contexts, this should include updated analysis of conflict, political economy, gender, and climate risks.	**Why:** A project that looks beneficial on paper can still deepen tensions, inequalities or grievances if its potential effects on conflict dynamics and local power relations are not understood and addressed.
REC 4	**Protect Grants as a key financing mechanism** The EU should maintain grants as a primary financing mechanism in highly and extremely fragile contexts and avoid excessive reliance on guarantees and blended finance.	**Why:** Commercial investment is unlikely to reach many places where development needs are greatest. Basic services, institutional capacity and local infrastructure often need public financing long before private investment becomes viable.
REC 5	**Do not position Global Gateway as the default approach in fragile contexts** The EU should assess the suitability of Global Gateway to the political, institutional, and economic conditions of each context, using a mix of instruments, including governance support, peacebuilding, local development, political engagement and, where appropriate, public–private investment.	**Why:** Fragility cannot be addressed through investment alone. In some contexts, infrastructure and private investment will be important; in others, the priority may be basic services, local governance, peacebuilding or political engagement.
REC 6	**Give gender-sensitive conflict prevention and peacebuilding a secure place in EU funding** Conflict prevention and peacebuilding should have a clear place in both thematic and geographic programming and be reflected in Global Europe performance frameworks, with sustained support for women's participation.	**Why:** Preventing conflict and building peace can reduce future humanitarian needs and the human and financial costs of prolonged conflict.
REC 7	**Protect a predictable humanitarian baseline of funding while retaining flexibility** The new framework should combine a predictable humanitarian allocation with flexible resources that can be used when needs change, while protecting the principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality, and independence.	**Why:** Humanitarian funding needs to be flexible because crises are unpredictable. But flexibility should sit on top of a reliable baseline so that humanitarian funding is not vulnerable to competing political priorities.
REC 8	**Give local actors a meaningful say throughout EU-funded projects** Involve local actors in priority-setting, design, implementation and evaluation of EU-funded projects, including assessing emerging political, social, and conflict risks. Expand direct, accessible funding for local organisations.	**Why:** Meaningful influence and access to funding are needed to support locally led action and ensure programmes are effective and respond to changing contexts.
REC 9	**Ensure that the Integrated Approach to Fragility and the HDP nexus work in practice** Strengthen joint analysis, complementary financing, and coordination across humanitarian, development, and peace actions, while addressing imbalances within the HDP nexus. At headquarters level, EU institutions should work more effectively together. At country level, EU Delegations need the staff, resources, and expertise to understand fragility, coordinate across sectors and engage meaningfully with civil society.	**Why:** Much of the ambition of the EU's new approach to fragility will ultimately depend on closing the gap between policies and what happens on the ground. Greater flexibility in Brussels will have limited impact if country-level actors do not have the capacity to use it effectively.
REC 10	**Measure long-term qualitative outcomes** The next MFF should pay greater attention to longer-term outcomes, including resilience, institutional capacity, inclusion, social cohesion, and conflict prevention, alongside conventional financial performance.	**Why:** What the EU measures influences what receives attention and resources. Some of the most important changes in fragile contexts are also the least visible in short-term performance frameworks.

Introduction

The international humanitarian, development and peacebuilding landscape is under growing pressure and is changing rapidly. Around the world, armed conflicts are on the rise and becoming increasingly protracted and fragmented;[2] 826 million people, around 10% of the world's population, are estimated to live in extreme poverty,[3] while one in four developing countries at the end of 2025 was poorer than it was in 2019;[4] humanitarian needs are exceptionally high, with 239 million people needing urgent humanitarian assistance in 2026.[5] Climate change adds another dimension to these challenges. In fragile settings, climate-related shocks can reinforce existing vulnerabilities,[6] interacting with poverty, weak institutions, displacement and conflict pressures and placing further strain on already limited resilience and coping capacities. In this crucial moment, there is a 'historic decline in foreign aid',[7] which is moving global development goals further out of reach.[8]

The issue is not only that less money is available. The character of development finance is changing. Development cooperation is increasingly expected to contribute simultaneously to poverty reduction, climate resilience, migration management, economic security, strategic connectivity and geopolitical objectives. For the European Union, this evolution is particularly visible in the Global Gateway investment and partnership strategy[9] and in the proposed long-term budget, also known as the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), for 2028–2034.[10]

While this paper examines how to proceed with the resources available, it is important to recognise that the EU could choose to direct a larger share of its funding to fragile contexts, which would make a significant difference. In 2024, 15.8% of EU institutions' gross bilateral Official Development Assistance (ODA) went to contexts experiencing high or extreme fragility,[11] compared with 52% of Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Development Assistance Committee (DAC) members' country-allocable ODA in 2023.[12] It was also well below recent calls from civil society organisations for a 60% target,[13] based on need, countries' ability to self-finance, aid effectiveness, and absorption capacity.[14] This means that fragile and conflict-affected states (FCAS) are already starting from a low baseline of support just as the character of development finance is changing.

The risks are greatest in fragile contexts.[15] These are precisely the contexts where development needs are often most acute, institutions are least able to absorb external financing, and the political consequences of investment can be most difficult to predict. They are also places where integrated responses across humanitarian assistance, development cooperation and peacebuilding can provide significant added value in addressing interconnected challenges. At the same time, as Dóchas policy paper The Future of Development Cooperation: Civil Society's Ambition for Ireland's EU Presidency notes, conflict, geopolitical fragmentation and humanitarian crises are converging with pressure on Overseas Development Assistance (ODA), while development cooperation is increasingly being framed through geopolitical, migration and security lenses.[16]

This is not about insulating development cooperation from geopolitical reality. That would neither be possible nor desirable. The issue is instead whether strategic interests are pursued in ways that help to reinforce development, humanitarian actions and peacebuilding, or whether development finance becomes increasingly shaped by priorities that are largely external to the needs of partner countries, thus undermining HDP goals in these countries.

For FCAS, this distinction has practical implications. A country may be strategically important because of its location, natural resources, ports, or connectivity corridors, while at the same time having weak institutions, deep political divisions, and high levels of poverty. These characteristics can make fragile settings simultaneously attractive and risky for investors. The EU therefore needs a financing model that considers the interactions of investments with the political, social, and economic realities of fragility, rather than treating investment decisions as purely technical or commercial.

The EU has already developed much of the policy architecture needed to address fragility, including the Humanitarian–Development–Peace (HDP) nexus[17] and the Integrated Approach to Fragility.[18] Within the latter, fragility is seen as a key obstacle to development that should be given greater consideration in political decision-making, programme planning, and the allocation of resources that strengthen resilience and empower societies to manage crises on their own. The challenge for the next MFF is to turn this policy ambition into an operational approach: one that aligns financing, instruments, programming and institutional coordination with the overarching goals, specific needs, and dynamics of fragile contexts.

Operationalising the Integrated Approach means striking the right balance between flexibility and predictability in EU funding. It requires mechanisms that allow rapid financial allocations to respond to unforeseen events, while maintaining stable multi-year funding to support long-term goals. While fragile contexts may require greater flexibility in dealing with emerging challenges, they also need longer time horizons and more sustained engagement with local actors. It also means recognising that the benefits that matter most in fragile settings are not always visible in conventional investment metrics. Stronger institutions, greater social trust, more inclusive politics and lower conflict risks may take time to emerge, and are difficult to quantify.

This paper, commissioned by Dóchas in the context of Ireland's 2026 Presidency of the Council of the EU, draws on EU and international policy documents, financing proposals, official sources, and academic literature, alongside an assessment of recent developments in EU external financing and fragility policy. The desk research was complemented by 15 semi-structured interviews and consultations with representatives of CSOs, researchers and practitioners working on development, humanitarian action, conflict prevention, and peacebuilding, as well as EU institutions. The analysis brings these sources together to identify broad agreement and points of debate, including regarding gaps between policy and practice. The recommendations that follow are grounded in this analysis and take account of the practical realities of EU financing and programming.

01 Changing Priorities in EU External Action

From development cooperation towards strategic external action

On 16 July 2025, the European Commission presented its proposal for an ambitious MFF for 2028–2034 amounting to nearly 2 trillion euros (€).[19] The proposal reflects a broader shift in EU external action. The Commission presents the next budget as one designed to make Europe more competitive, secure, and resilient while strengthening its role in the world. As part of the proposed MFF, the European Commission, the European Parliament, and the Council of the European Union are negotiating a Global Europe Instrument, with €200 billion for 2028–2034, to 'adapt' the EU's 'external action financing to better serve its strategic interests and address current and future crises'. [20] The proposed Instrument is grounded on four main principles: simplification of the funding architecture, coherence of action, financial flexibility, and impact of EU action.[21]

A simplified, more coherent, and more flexible external instrument has obvious advantages for the EU's external action. The EU needs the capacity to respond quickly and effectively to crises, adapt to changing humanitarian, economic and security developments, and confront challenges that may not have been foreseen when programmes were originally designed. But addressing the root causes of poverty, underdevelopment, and conflict requires predictable and sustained funding, because meaningful and lasting change depends on long-term investments and the continuity of development and peacebuilding efforts. Moreover, flexibility is not neutral. It changes who has discretion over the allocation of resources and how easily funding can be shifted between priorities.

This is particularly important for FCAS and least developed countries (LDCs). The absence of minimum spending targets creates a risk that funding will follow political or economic priorities rather than partner countries' needs. Greater flexibility could also undermine predictability for partner countries, especially where institutions and financing systems are already under strain.[22] These concerns are reflected in a joint call by CONCORD (the European confederation of non-governmental organisations working on sustainable development and international cooperation), the European Peacebuilding Liaison Office (EPLO), and Voluntary Organisations in Cooperation in Emergencies (VOICE), which argues that the future Global Europe Regulation should embed fragility as a cross-cutting priority while balancing flexibility with predictable, needs-based engagement. The three networks specifically warn against the risks of politicisation and disengagement from fragile contexts and call for stronger safeguards around the use of flexible funding.[23]

Importantly, the concern is not about the needs-based nature of humanitarian allocations managed by the European Commission's Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (DG ECHO), but about whether wider political decisions on the allocation of the EU's external-action envelope could increasingly favour countries and regions considered strategically important to the EU. The risk, in other words, may arise upstream of humanitarian programming, through decisions about where and on what the EU chooses to engage.[24]

The evidence reviewed for this paper suggests that the next MFF should therefore preserve poverty reduction, sustainable development and human rights as clear objectives rather than allowing them to become secondary considerations within a broader strategic framework.[25] This direction is also reflected in the Council of the European Union's May 2026 conclusions on fragility, which call for a 'stronger, more coordinated, and long-term' EU approach in fragile contexts, based on the HDP nexus and a focus on tackling the root causes of fragility, including conflict, poverty, and climate change.[26] At the same time, there are concerns that European strategic interests – including migration management, economic security, and access to critical resources – could increasingly influence funding allocations. The challenge in shaping the next MFF is therefore not to choose between strategic engagement and development objectives, but to ensure that strategic priorities do not displace the needs-based principles on which effective engagement in fragile contexts depends.

Fragile contexts often require the ability to adapt funding as circumstances change, but this is not the same as giving the Commission greater discretion to move resources between priorities. For local organisations, by contrast, flexibility can mean simpler procedures and more adaptable funding that allows them to respond to changing circumstances. The question is therefore not simply whether the next MFF should be more flexible, but how that flexibility is determined and who benefits from it.[27]

There is also a practical limit to how much flexibility EU funding systems can deliver. Procurement rules, accountability, and transparency requirements, as well as internal procedures, can make it difficult to move resources quickly, even where the financing framework formally allows it. This matters particularly for anticipatory action, where responding before a crisis escalates requires the ability to commit and pre-finance resources in advance.[28] Flexibility in the financing framework therefore needs to be matched by pre-planned implementation arrangements that allow resources to be moved at the speed required by fragile and rapidly changing contexts.

The interviews also highlighted a more fundamental limitation: development finance and private investment cannot by themselves address the political causes of fragility. Where conflict, weak governance, or contested political settlements are at the heart of a crisis, diplomatic engagement, support for political dialogue, and efforts to uphold international law may be as important as the financing instruments deployed alongside them. Financial arrangements can support these efforts yet cannot substitute for them.[29]

Competitiveness: a major driver of EU external action

Much of the discussion about the changing EU external action agenda has focused on geopolitics and security. Yet the growing emphasis on competitiveness[30] may prove just as consequential[31] as it increasingly competes with sustainable development, conflict prevention, and peacebuilding for limited resources.

The distinction matters. Competitiveness does not necessarily look like a competing policy objective in the same way as defence or migration. Yet it can influence the selection of countries, sectors, and financing modalities. Projects with visible economic returns, strategic connectivity benefits, or private investment potential may become more attractive than less visible investments in governance, social cohesion, or conflict prevention.

For fragile states, this creates a particular risk. The countries most in need of grants and long-term institutional support are often precisely those least able to attract commercially driven investment. This shift towards defining development partly in terms of competitiveness could strongly influence external action choices. The new MFF should make clearer how investments are assessed against previously agreed sustainable development objectives, particularly where their primary rationale is to advance European competitiveness or strategic interests.

02 Fragility at the Centre of the Development Challenge

The EU's approach to fragility has evolved significantly. The Commission's 2026 Joint Communication on humanitarian action[32] and accompanying Staff Working Document on an Integrated Approach to Fragility[33] mark a shift towards treating fragility as a multidimensional and long-term challenge, rather than as a series of separate humanitarian, development, and conflict problems. The Integrated Approach places greater emphasis on the underlying causes of fragility while seeking to strengthen resilience, peace, and sustainable development, alongside continued humanitarian assistance.

Fragility is not a single condition. The OECD's multidimensional approach recognises different combinations of political, economic, social, environmental, and security risks.[34] A relatively stable lower middle-income country with strong public institutions may be able to absorb guarantees, loans and blended finance, including the associated debt.[35] A country affected by active conflict, weak institutions, and limited state authority may instead require grants, humanitarian financing, local partnerships, and flexible peacebuilding support. The financing model therefore needs to reflect the context rather than assuming that the same instruments will work across the full spectrum of fragility.

Recent analysis reaches a similar conclusion, arguing that the EU needs to differentiate its financing approach across partner countries and that highly fragile and conflict-affected contexts are poorly suited to investment-led approaches. These contexts require continued access to grants, concessional finance, and targeted technical assistance.[36] The May 2026 conclusions of the Council of the European Union likewise call for continued, focused and sustained EU engagement in fragile partner countries and regions, particularly those where fragility is high or extreme, including through development cooperation and flexible financing.[37] Dóchas members similarly argue that grants should remain the primary modality in highly and extremely fragile contexts and that limits should be placed on the proportion of ODA channelled through blended finance.[38]

Under the new Global Europe Instrument, the balance between grants, investment, technical assistance, humanitarian support, and other forms of financing should depend on the nature of the crisis, the level of risk, the strength of institutions, and the space available for longer-term development. This is also reflected in the March 2026 joint call by CONCORD, EPLO, and VOICE, which argues that fragility should be treated as a cross-cutting priority in Global Europe and that highly and extremely fragile contexts should have access to differentiated financing, including continued reliance on grants.[39]

03 The Global Gateway and the Risks of a Default Approach

The Global Gateway is likely to remain one of the defining features of EU external action over the coming years. Its focus on infrastructure, connectivity and investment responds to genuine development needs. Many fragile countries suffer from major infrastructure deficits, and investments in transport, energy, and digital connectivity can support economic opportunity, regional integration and longer-term resilience. But such investments cannot by themselves address the development deficits found in many fragile settings. In some contexts, basic education, health, social protection and local services may be more important to resilience than economic and physical infrastructure itself. Therefore, for pathways out of fragility, Global Gateway investment needs to be complemented by grant-based support for human development rather than treated as a substitute for it.[40]

The conditions for Global Gateway investments in fragile and conflict-affected contexts are very different from those in more stable settings. The central issue is not whether the Global Gateway should engage in these contexts, but how that engagement is designed, governed, and implemented. In this regard, transparency and accountability in decisions about which investments are prioritised are particularly important: will the Global Gateway contribute to sustainable development and resilience, or will it reinforce existing inequalities, political tensions, and patterns of exclusion?

Connectivity is political

Infrastructure projects change political and economic relationships. Roads determine which regions gain access to markets. Ports create new centres of economic activity. Energy projects affect patterns of employment and public revenue. Digital networks influence communities' access to information and services.[41] This means that infrastructure projects in fragile settings should not be viewed simply as neutral investments exposed to existing conflict risks. They can also exacerbate those risks by altering access to land, resources, markets and political influence.

A major corridor or mining project, for example, may reshape local political economies and relations between governments, companies, local authorities and communities. It may change who benefits from economic activity, who controls access to land or resources, and which regions gain from new infrastructure. Conflict analysis therefore needs to consider these potential effects, not only the risks that existed before the project began.

The Global Gateway is not inherently incompatible with fragility objectives. The Commission's Staff Working Document (SWD) offers useful evidence on this point. It identifies examples of Global Gateway investment projects in fragile contexts linked to prevention, peacebuilding, and resilience.[42] The more useful question is whether investments are designed and implemented in ways that take the local context seriously.

The limits of the 360-degree approach

The EU has promoted a 360-degree approach in the implementation of the Global Gateway. It revolves around offering 'a qualitatively superior and innovative alternative to other public investment offers for global infrastructure development',[43] which rests on six key principles: democratic values and high standards; good governance and transparency; equal and mutually beneficial partnerships; green and clean projects; a security-focused approach that integrates risk assessment and resilience measures; and efforts to catalyse private sector investment.[44]

In June 2026, the Council of the European Union adopted its Conclusions on the Global Gateway.[45] These reiterate the importance of the 360-degree approach in the implementation of the Global Gateway, stressing that investments should combine infrastructure with regulatory reform, skills development, and institutional strengthening, and that projects in fragile settings should be context specific, risk informed and conflict sensitive, in line with the 'do-no-harm' principle. However, there are no provisions concerning how these commitments should affect project selection, implementation, and monitoring. More importantly, it remains unclear what incentives, safeguards, or accountability mechanisms will ensure that investment decisions are informed by development impact, conflict sensitivity, gender, and climate considerations. This is in line with the EU Global Gateway investment criteria, which place significant weight on alignment with partner country priorities and EU strategic interests and do not include sustainable or human development in the partner country as a core requirement.[46] This raises a broader concern about the hierarchy of interests embedded in the Global Gateway. Where investment decisions are strongly shaped by EU strategic interests and the mobilisation of private capital, development objectives and rights considerations risk becoming secondary rather than determining factors.[47]

The German approach, which is more explicit in requiring a development added value, *'entwicklungspolitischen Mehrwert'*,[48] for the partner country, illustrates the importance and feasibility for EU Member States to introduce stronger development safeguards at the national level. As CONCORD has also highlighted, there is a need therefore to close the gap between the ambition of the 360-degree approach and its concrete, measurable and accountable implementation.[49]

04 Investing in Conflict Prevention and Peacebuilding

The peace component of the HDP nexus, often underfunded and considered politically sensitive, remains the weakest element, with limited integration into EU external action programming and decision-making. Humanitarian assistance has a clear institutional home, while development cooperation benefits from substantial, albeit reduced, budgets and established programming structures. Peacebuilding and conflict prevention, by contrast, remain less firmly embedded in the EU's financing system.

The HDP nexus should not be understood simply as a mechanism for moving development resources into places experiencing humanitarian crises. Conflict prevention also requires sustained investment in countries and regions where risks are building but a major crisis has not yet occurred. Development, humanitarian, and peace actors therefore need to work across a spectrum of fragility rather than treating the nexus mainly as a response to acute crises.[50]

There is also a risk that pressure to respond to immediate crises and support for hard security approaches in response to increasing violence in fragile contexts draw resources away from the longer-term work needed to prevent conflict and address its structural causes. Addressing these drivers requires more than a predominantly short-term response.[51] Conflict prevention often needs sustained engagement before violence escalates: supporting mediation, strengthening local peacebuilding efforts, addressing emerging tensions, and helping communities and institutions manage disputes. These kinds of interventions can be difficult to fund when financing is organised primarily around immediate needs or clearly defined crises. A system that responds mainly once violence and humanitarian needs have become acute, risks leaving too little space for the work that could have helped prevent them.[52]

Similarly, post-conflict settings require investments in peacebuilding, reconciliation, transitional justice, and democratic institution building in order to stabilise and avoid relapses into armed violence.

The consultations suggest that thematic peacebuilding funding could lose visibility within broader 'global threats' programming, while geographic programming has so far made insufficient use of its existing potential for peacebuilding. The concern is therefore not simply that peacebuilding resources could be reduced, but that peacebuilding itself could be sidelined as a distinct objective.[53] This matters for the EU's ability to implement the HDP nexus because without strengthening the peace component, nexus approaches cannot achieve sustainable outcomes, particularly in contexts where early action can help prevent crises from spiralling into armed conflict.

Conflict prevention is also difficult to capture through conventional funding and performance frameworks because its success is often defined by what does not happen. A mediation process that prevents violence, a local agreement that avoids displacement, or an inclusive governance reform that reduces tensions may produce few easily measurable results. Compared to life-saving emergency assistance, their importance is also less easy to convey to the public. Yet these interventions are much cheaper and can help reduce future humanitarian needs and avoid some of the costs associated with protracted crises. EU funding therefore needs to recognise that some of the most valuable interventions may be those whose success is difficult to see.

05 Local Ownership and Decision-Making

Locally led programming, which covers strategy and priority setting through to implementation and monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) has become an increasingly important part of how humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding assistance is discussed and delivered. There is a general understanding that organisations and communities closest to the issues being addressed are often better placed to grasp and respond to local needs, risks, and opportunities, and should have a bigger role in shaping the initiatives intended to address them. Locally led models are now firmly established in EU policy language, while CSOs have consistently highlighted the importance of empowering local actors and building inclusive partnerships grounded in local ownership. The harder question is whether this is changing how decisions are actually made. This has implications not only for who receives funding, but also for how partnerships are structured, who makes decisions, and how risks are shared.

The key question is not only how much funding reaches local actors, but how much influence they have over the decisions that determine how that funding is used and how risks are shared. Locally led programming is ultimately a question of power as much as funding, and of building social contracts that are locally led and nationally owned. This also means being more transparent about what locally led models and related targets actually measure. Reporting the share of funding reaching local organisations is useful, but it does not show which organisations receive it, what role they play in partnerships, or how much influence they have over programme decisions.[54]

The same principle should apply to major EU investments. Local actors should not simply be consulted about projects designed elsewhere. They should have meaningful opportunities to influence decisions about priorities, project design, implementation and monitoring.[55] Locally led programming risks becoming little more than a change in where funding goes if local organisations remain primarily implementers of priorities defined elsewhere. The consultations also highlighted the burden that complex compliance requirements can place on local actors, particularly in difficult operating environments.[56]

06 The EU's Integrated Approach to Fragility and the HDP Nexus

Considering increasing fragility, overlapping crises, and mounting pressure on ODA budgets, the strategic relevance of the HDP nexus is clearer today than ever before. The latest Integrated Approach to Fragility represents a potentially important step forward because it places fragility itself, rather than one individual sector, at the centre of analysis. The question for the next MFF is therefore less whether the EU has the right policies than whether its funding and institutional arrangements are good enough to make them work.[57]

There is a growing body of practical experience, tested tools, and country examples. The Commission's Staff Working Document is particularly useful in this regard because it gives a fairly candid assessment of what has happened in practice. It acknowledges that implementation of the HDP nexus still falls short of expectations. Joint analysis of risks, needs, and structural causes is not systematic; complementary financing remains difficult; the peace pillar needs stronger integration; and approaches that have produced results in several pilot countries have often been difficult to expand.[58] The Council of the EU's May 2026 conclusions reinforce the case for addressing these weaknesses, calling for a stronger, more coordinated and long-term EU approach to fragility based on shared outcomes across the nexus.[59]

For the next MFF, there are practical implications. The EU has many of the policies and tools it needs, but they do not always work together as they should. The challenge is to connect analysis more closely to programming and funding, allow different instruments and actors to work together over longer periods, and address the imbalance between the humanitarian, development and peace dimensions of the HDP nexus.[60] The next MFF is an opportunity to make this work better in practice, rather than simply adding another layer of policy.

In crisis settings, organisations often find practical ways of working together because the problems they face do not fit neatly into institutional categories. At the headquarters level, however, separate mandates, budget lines, and accountability systems can still encourage organisations to plan and work in silos. This can be an obstacle to pursuing the more joined-up approaches that are needed to respond to development, peace, and humanitarian challenges.

There is also a significant gap between the headquarters and country levels. Organisations working in fragile contexts do not always have a clear view of emerging EU priorities or changes in policy and programming, while different Commission services may have limited awareness of each other's work. Civil society organisations can consequently end up spending considerable time engaging at the EU level simply to understand where policy is heading. At a time when capacity at the country level is also under pressure, this risks widening the gap between the ambitions of EU policy frameworks and the ability to deliver them in practice.[61]

In an effort to become more efficient and effective, the EU is considering changes to its Delegations Network, including the establishment of 18 regional hubs. There are concerns that regionalisation and reductions in physical presence could negatively affect Europe's global role and undermine the effectiveness of its work.[62]

Effective engagement in fragile contexts depends on knowing which actors can operate in particular areas, which have the trust of local communities, and how local political and economic relationships affect implementation. This includes understanding the different roles and expertise of women-led organisations, national and international non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and other civil society actors, which can provide important insights into local dynamics and emerging risks. Moving functions away from country-level Delegations can therefore have consequences that are not captured simply by counting staff or administrative costs. A smaller physical presence may also mean less knowledge of the local context and weaker relationships with the organisations the EU depends on to deliver its programmes.

07 Measuring What Matters

The proposed MFF places considerable emphasis on performance, simplification and measurable results. This is understandable: public resources need to show what they achieve. But what the EU chooses to measure will also influence what it prioritises. If the performance framework focuses mainly on outputs that are easy to count, less visible forms of external action can quickly receive less attention.

Civil society organisations have raised concerns that the proposed MFF risks being too heavily focused on outputs and short-term results without adequately capturing human development, poverty reduction, gender equality, social protection, and support for civil society.[63]

The Global Gateway illustrates the problem. The number of kilometres of railway built, the amount of private capital mobilised or the number of people connected to a digital network are useful indicators of activity. But they do not tell us whether an investment has reduced inequality, strengthened institutions, improved social cohesion or increased trust between citizens and public authorities.

Recommendation 1 – Do Not Treat Fragile Contexts as One Homogeneous Category

For financing, an integrated approach cannot mean using the same instruments across different forms of fragility. If the EU is serious about implementing the HDP nexus and its Integrated Approach to Fragility, financing needs to reflect the political, institutional, and economic conditions of each fragile setting. To operationalise this, the EU should combine humanitarian, development, peacebuilding, and climate resources where appropriate, while differentiating between grants, guarantees, blended finance, technical assistance, and other instruments according to need. The Commission's own analysis points towards this need for context-specific responses and stronger complementarity between different forms of EU engagement.

A useful way forward would be to distinguish between three broad situations, while recognising that countries can move between them over time:

- **Highly and extremely fragile contexts.** These contexts should receive a strong emphasis on grants, humanitarian assistance, peacebuilding, support for local civil society and strengthening basic services. Investment instruments can still have a role where conditions allow, but they should not determine the overall financing model.
- **Fragile but institutionally more capable contexts.** Here, the EU can combine grants, sector support, technical assistance, investment and private-sector mobilisation. But these choices should be based on a clear understanding of the political and economic context, including conflict and climate risks and the capacity of institutions to manage and benefit from different forms of finance.
- **Contexts emerging from crisis.** In such settings, dedicated instruments for transition financing could allow enough flexibility to respond to renewed instability while gradually creating the conditions for longer-term development and investment. The transition should not be assumed to be linear: Countries emerging from crisis can quickly face new shocks or renewed conflict.

This approach is broadly consistent with the Commission's own analysis and conclusions on context-specific responses and adaptable frameworks,[64] while addressing a key policy concern: avoiding an exclusive focus on "extremely fragile" countries that overlooks contexts where fragility is already present and preventive action could still make a difference.

Recommendation 2 – Keep Development Objectives at the Centre of Global Europe

The new Global Europe Regulation should explicitly protect development objectives and priorities. This should include binding targets, safeguards, and monitoring indicators for development priorities. The shift towards a more strategic EU external action does not remove the legal and political commitments underpinning EU development cooperation. Article 208 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union establishes that the primary objective of EU development cooperation is reducing and ending poverty.[65] This principle should remain clearly reflected in the new Regulation, while the principles of the European Consensus on Development continue to underpin the new framework.[66]

Beyond legal certainty, how the Regulation allocates and structures funding will shape political incentives and determine how far development objectives can be protected. If development objectives, support for FCAS and civil society are explicitly reflected in the Global Europe Regulation[67] and its associated Performance Framework, they can provide a basis for scrutiny by the European Parliament, Member States and civil society. If these priorities are instead absorbed into broad and flexible funding envelopes, without formal targets, then they become much more dependent on political choices and implementation decisions.

This is particularly important where priorities are described as being 'mainstreamed' rather than backed by spending commitments. Without some form of target or other safeguard, priorities such as human development, gender equality, and support for fragile contexts can become difficult to track and vulnerable to competing demands.[68] The issue is therefore not simply whether these priorities are mentioned in the Regulation, but whether the framework provides sufficient means to monitor and protect them in practice, alongside structural incentives and accountability mechanisms to ensure implementation.

This can easily be overlooked in the MFF negotiations, where attention naturally focuses on overall allocations and competing spending priorities. Yet the design of the funding architecture can have significant consequences for what the EU is ultimately able to fund and protect through its external action. Stronger formal, stated safeguards would not prevent the EU from pursuing strategic priorities; rather, they would help ensure that these priorities do not come at the expense of its development commitments, thus undermining the EU's values and its credibility as a partner.

Recommendation 3 – Make conflict sensitivity a condition for EU external action

The next MFF should make conflict sensitivity a standard requirement across EU external financing. This is consistent with the Council of the European Union's May 2026 conclusions, which emphasise that EU external action should remain coherent, conflict sensitive, and based on strong context analysis.[69] Conflict sensitivity requires understanding of how humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding interventions interact with existing conflict dynamics and using that understanding to avoid exacerbating tensions and, where possible, contribute to more peaceful and inclusive outcomes.[70] This is particularly important for large projects and investments in fragile settings, which can significantly change local political economies.[71]

Conflict analysis is one important part of conflict sensitivity. EU external action in fragile and conflict-affected settings should therefore be informed by analysis of conflict and political economy dynamics, as well as gender and climate risks. This should apply across the project cycle, from design and financing through implementation and evaluation. Gender and climate considerations should be systematically incorporated in all HDP interventions rather than treated as separate issues.

CONCORD, EPLO, and VOICE have called for conflict sensitivity and regularly updated conflict analysis to become mandatory for all actions under Global Europe. A key goal is the reintroduction of a conflict-sensitivity requirement in the Regulation's general principles.[72] A conflict-sensitive assessment should consider:

- who benefits from the investment;
- who may lose access to land, resources or markets;
- whether the project changes relations between central and peripheral authorities;
- how local political elites might use the project;
- whether the investment reinforces or reduces regional inequalities;
- how grievances can be raised and addressed; and
- whether local communities and civil society have meaningful influence over project design and implementation.

Conflict analysis must also integrate gender dynamics of conflict and peace to advance inclusion and prevent worsening inequalities, alongside climate and environmental assessments that evaluate potential risks to local vulnerability and long-term development gains.

But requiring conflict analysis is not enough. It needs to be updated as circumstances change and, more importantly, used to inform programming decisions. An analysis that is produced once but does not influence how programmes are designed or adapted risks becoming a procedural exercise rather than a useful tool for managing conflict risks.

Civil society organisations engaged in the MFF discussions have also raised concerns about the narrowing of the conflict-sensitivity requirement in the Commission's proposal for the 2028–2034 period. The current Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI)–Global Europe (GE) requires conflict analysis in FCAS in order to ensure conflict sensitivity of development programmes and other areas of external action, 'along all phases of the intervention cycle'.[73] However, the proposed Global Europe Regulation only refers to conflict sensitivity with regard to actions related to crisis, peace, and foreign policy needs.[74]

Conflict sensitivity is not against investments and business operations. It is simply part of responsible corporate conduct in fragile settings.[75] Private investment can contribute to development, but its commercial logic should not be assumed to coincide automatically with objectives such as poverty reduction, conflict prevention, or social inclusion. This makes transparency, political economy analysis, and meaningful public and civil society scrutiny particularly important where the Global Gateway is deployed in fragile settings.[76]

Civil society involvement should also extend beyond consultation. NGOs and local organisations can help identify local needs, assess political and social risks and connect large investments to services and communities that may otherwise remain outside the project itself.[77] This is particularly important where large projects affect communities that have limited influence over decisions taken by governments, companies or international institutions.

Conflict sensitivity requires clear incentives and accountability mechanisms for them to be taken seriously. Political and commercial interests may work against the processes needed to understand local power relations, land disputes, and existing grievances. Conflict sensitivity will have limited impact unless it is made a condition and it is incentivised, for example, through eligibility to finance, the price of loans and guarantees, and political risk insurance. These should be built into project preparation, financing decisions, due diligence, and monitoring, rather than treated as 'nice to have' measures.

Recommendation 4 – Protect Grants as a Key Financing Mechanism

The case for retaining grant-based finance is particularly strong because many of the investments most needed in fragile contexts are unlikely to generate a commercial return. Basic services, primary education, health systems, and community infrastructure are essential for reducing poverty and strengthening resilience, as are investments that advance gender equality, but they may offer limited opportunities for private investors.[78] The challenge is therefore not simply that private finance may be reluctant to enter the most fragile settings. It is also that the development needs are often greatest where commercial investment is least viable. A shift towards investment-led financing could consequently leave behind countries and communities that are both least commercially attractive and most vulnerable.

None of this argues against private investment in fragile contexts. The private sector can contribute to employment, infrastructure, services, and local economic development and the Commission's Integrated Approach to Fragility recognises the expanding role of private sector development within the HDP nexus.[79] The more important question is how public and private finance should work together, and in what sequence.

Private investment usually depends on a degree of political and institutional stability. In some fragile contexts, public grants may therefore need to finance the institutional, social, and physical foundations that make responsible investment possible. Public support can also help absorb some of the risks associated with political, economic, or climate-related shocks. Treating blended finance as a substitute for grant-based development finance risks reversing this sequence: instead of using public resources to create the conditions for sustainable investment, it places greater weight on investment instruments in contexts where the underlying conditions for investment may not yet exist.[80]

The implication for the next MFF is not that the EU should choose between grants and investment, or between development finance and private capital. It is that the financing mix needs to reflect the diverse realities of different fragile contexts. A credible and dynamic approach to fragility will require sufficient grant-based and concessional resources for the most challenging settings, alongside investment instruments where the conditions exist for them to add value.

Recommendation 5 – Do not Position Global Gateway as the default approach in fragile contexts

The Global Gateway should be one instrument within the EU's broader external action toolbox, rather than becoming the default approach for all external engagement. This is particularly important because the Global Gateway's investment logic is not equally appropriate across all fragile contexts. Large-scale infrastructure and investment may be highly relevant where there is genuine potential for productive investment and regional connectivity. In other settings, the more appropriate EU response may be support for local governance, public services, peacebuilding, institutional capacity, or political dialogue.

Scale is another issue. Large Global Gateway packages may be appropriate for major infrastructure projects, but the financial thresholds and structures associated with them can exclude smaller markets, local businesses, and projects focused on public goods. In fragile contexts, where development needs are often dispersed and local markets are weak, a financing model designed primarily around large investment packages will not always fit the problem.[81]

The question should therefore be what combination of instruments best responds to the context, rather than how Global Gateway can be extended to more countries. There will be contexts in which infrastructure investment is appropriate. There will be others where the priority is humanitarian assistance, mediation, local governance, institutional reform, or support to civil society. The financing system should allow the EU to make this distinction, while leaving room for smaller-scale and grant-based initiatives, including partnerships involving local businesses and civil society organisations.

The Commission's own fragility analysis points in this direction. Its proposed approach combines development, humanitarian, political, and peacebuilding tools rather than assuming that one modality can address the full range of fragility drivers.[82] The next MFF should preserve that room for differentiation.

Recommendation 6 – Give gender-sensitive conflict prevention and peacebuilding a secure place in EU funding

The Commission's fragility framework emphasises the need to scale up structural development interventions alongside peacebuilding and conflict prevention in protracted crises.[83] The new financial framework should reflect this in the way funding is structured and programmed. This does not necessarily require a proliferation of new instruments. It means keeping conflict prevention and peacebuilding as a key area in both thematic and geographic programming, allowing resources to be used for preventive action when risks emerge, and making long-term peacebuilding objectives part of country-level analysis and programming decisions.
Women's full participation in peace processes, conflict resolution, and security decision-making, alongside their protection from violence and rights violations during conflict, is an essential part of this agenda. While women and girls are increasingly at risk in modern armed conflicts,[84] women's organisations and women-led peacebuilding efforts often play key roles in early warning, mediation, community resilience, and conflict prevention. But these activities can be difficult to sustain when funding is concentrated on acute crises or short-term, measurable outputs. Protecting gender targets therefore needs to be accompanied by financing that allows women's organisations to participate meaningfully in peacebuilding and prevention over time.

Implementing the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda[85] is therefore directly relevant to the current negotiations. The apparent willingness of the Commission, Council of the EU, and European Parliament to maintain gender targets for external action provides an opportunity to protect and strengthen the role of women in peacebuilding and conflict prevention.[86] This should be reflected in both the allocation of funding and the way programmes are designed and assessed, so that women's leadership, agency, and rights remain an integral part of the EU's long-term approach to conflict prevention and peacebuilding.

Recommendation 7 –
Protect a Predictable Humanitarian Baseline of Funding while Retaining Flexibility

Civil society organisations have welcomed the new Joint Communication on Humanitarian Aid as an important political reaffirmation of humanitarian principles, while warning that implementation must protect humanitarian action from instrumentalisation by political, security, and migration objectives.[87] The consultations for this paper similarly point to the need for a strong and predictable humanitarian baseline, with flexibility added on top rather than used as a substitute for predictable funding.[88]

This distinction is important for current MFF negotiations. Humanitarian actors need flexibility because crises are inherently unpredictable, and funding needs can change rapidly. But flexibility without a reliable baseline can make humanitarian funding more vulnerable to shifts in political priorities, particularly when resources are under pressure. The EU therefore needs a system that provides predictable funding for ongoing humanitarian needs while retaining enough flexibility to respond to emerging crises.

The European Parliament has made a similar argument, calling for a predictable annual baseline for humanitarian funding alongside an adequate reserve, while preserving the principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality, and independence.[89] This would give humanitarian organisations greater certainty to plan and maintain programmes while ensuring that additional resources can be mobilised when needs change unexpectedly.

The distinction also matters beyond programming. If humanitarian funding is expected to deal with increasingly frequent or prolonged crises without a sufficiently predictable baseline, pressure on the wider external action budget will grow. Predictability is therefore not just part of protecting humanitarian action from short-term political pressures, but also ensuring that the EU can respond to needs in the areas of development, conflict prevention, and peacebuilding.

Recommendation 8 –
Give local actors a meaningful say throughout EU-funded projects

There is a need to address the persistent gap between commitments to locally led development and humanitarian programming and how they are designed and implemented in practice.

Local civil society should not be treated as a single constituency.[90] Formal and informal organisations can have very different sources of legitimacy, capacity and influence, while power differences also exist between civil society organisations and the communities they represent and serve.[91] Some of the organisations that are most important to local mobilisation do not fit the conventional NGO model. Informal community groups, social movements, and women's rights organisations may have strong local legitimacy but limited administrative capacity and few opportunities to access EU funding directly. Locally led programming and strategies that focus only on transferring funding through formally registered organisations risk missing some of the actors best placed to influence local social and political change.[92]

Bureaucracy and the limited accessibility of EU funding remain major barriers.[93] Minimum project sizes, complex compliance requirements, and the preference for large contracts or consortia can make direct access particularly difficult for smaller organisations. As a result, organisations may be recognised as important local actors while still depending on larger international organisations to access EU funding.[94]

Longer funding horizons matter too. Social and political change, particularly around women's rights, peacebuilding and local governance, rarely fits comfortably within a 12- to 36-month project cycle. More predictable multiannual support would allow local organisations to plan, adapt, and build lasting relationships rather than repeatedly reorganising around short funding cycles.[95]

Localisation is not simply about transferring more money to local organisations. Civil society experts also point to the importance of equitable partnerships, shared decision-making, local leadership, a principled approach to risk sharing, and greater flexibility in donor procedures.[96] Local organisations should be involved throughout the programme cycle, from needs assessment and design through to implementation, monitoring, and evaluation. Their role should also include identifying emerging political, social, and conflict risks, drawing on their knowledge of local dynamics and relationships to provide early warning and help the EU and its partners anticipate problems and adapt programming before they escalate into crises.[97]

Crucially, advancing locally led development should not be seen as a zero-sum choice between local CSOs and international actors. Rather, it relies on an ecosystem of complementary roles and support for civil society in all its diversity. In genuine partnerships, international and national NGOs provide critical support, for example, by helping small or informal local organisations navigate EU administrative hurdles, access funding, and share operational risks, without taking over leadership or decision-making authority.

The Commission's Staff Working Document contains some encouraging evidence. It recognises the importance of equitable partnerships with local actors and identifies collaboration with civil society, young people, community leaders, and women-led organisations as important to sustainable and conflict-sensitive interventions.[98] The difficulty is turning that recognition into changes in how funding is designed and delivered.

For the next MFF, this would mean:

- involving local actors in country-level priority setting and programme design;
- fostering equitable partnerships across local CSOs, national NGOs, and international NGOs (INGOs) that leverage their complementary strengths while supporting local leadership;
- supporting organisational capacity rather than short-term project implementation;
- increasing opportunities for direct funding;
- simplifying application and reporting procedures where proportionate;
- ensuring local participation is funded rather than treated as an unpaid consultation exercise; and
- establishing fair and balanced risk-sharing arrangements.

Recommendation 9 –
Ensure that the Integrated Approach to Fragility and the HDP nexus work in practice

The well-established policy framework for the HDP nexus and, more recently, the new Integrated Approach to Fragility must be implemented more consistently and broadly in practice, especially given the rapidly changing global context. The Commission's Staff Working Document identifies a similar need and proposes fragility frameworks designed to establish a common understanding across Commission services, the European External Action Service (EEAS; the Diplomatic Service of the EU), EU Delegations, and ECHO field offices. The aim is to provide a stronger basis for coordinated analysis and action. The next MFF could help make this approach work by bringing funding arrangements and institutional responsibilities more closely into line with how fragility is actually understood and addressed.

This should also include planning for situations in which major and abrupt political changes in partner countries affect the conditions for EU cooperation. In settings where governments are overthrown or where parts of a country come under the control of armed groups as de facto authorities, existing funding arrangements may no longer be viable. Fragility frameworks and country-level planning documents should therefore be able to anticipate and respond to such scenarios and set out how funding could be redirected to alternative implementing partners, including UN agencies, international and national NGOs, and local civil society organisations. Preparing these options upstream would allow the EU to adapt more quickly while maintaining engagement with affected populations and supporting development and peacebuilding objectives, rather than defaulting to a predominantly humanitarian response.[99]

The fragility approach and the HDP nexus will ultimately have to work at the country level, making EU Delegations central their implementation. If the EU expects Delegations to coordinate across humanitarian, development, and peace actors and understand rapidly changing political contexts, they need the staff, expertise, and resources to do so.[100] Crucially, this should include the capacity for sustained interaction with local civil society and other actors, and to incorporate their analysis into EU decision-making. This can strengthen the EU's ability not only to respond to crises, but to anticipate them and support preventive action before risks escalate.[101]

The proposed fragility focal points could help, but only if they have sufficient seniority and influence. Fragility cannot become the responsibility of a single relatively junior official while broader programming decisions continue to be made elsewhere.[102]

This matters for the next MFF because greater flexibility in financing will have limited effect if country-level structures do not have the capacity to use that flexibility effectively. How the EU funds fragile contexts therefore cannot be separated from the people, expertise and institutional presence it has on the ground.

Recommendation 10 –
Measure Long-Term Qualitative Outcomes

The EU's performance framework should look beyond what is delivered to what is changing on the ground, particularly in fragile contexts where progress is often less visible and can take longer. This could include:

- resilience to political, economic, and climate shocks;
- the capacity of public institutions to provide services and respond to crises;
- inclusion, inequality, and the participation and representation of women and marginalised groups;
- the strength and sustainability of local partnerships;
- social cohesion;
- conflict risks; and
- access to services.

Human development also needs to be considered over a longer period. In fragile settings, investment in early childhood development, primary education, and basic health may have little immediate visibility in a performance framework, but can be critical to resilience and future economic participation.[103]

Some of the most important changes in fragile contexts – preventing conflict, building trust, strengthening local institutions, or helping communities cope with repeated shocks – are difficult to capture through short-term targets. The answer should not be to ignore these outcomes because they are harder to measure. A results monitoring and evaluation methodology should give them appropriate weight when assessing whether EU support is working.

What This Means for Ireland's EU Presidency

Ireland comes to the MFF negotiations with a relatively strong record on development cooperation, humanitarian principles, multilateralism, and engagement with civil society.

The Dóchas EU Presidency paper sees this as an opportunity for Ireland to act as a 'Model Power': using political influence and reputation, rather than financial weight alone, to defend a values-based approach to EU external action.[104] For FCAS, four priorities stand out:

- **Protect development objectives in the MFF architecture**
  Ireland should support clear references to poverty eradication, sustainable development and human rights within the Global Europe Regulation. As the Global Gateway is rolled out, it is important to advocate for sustainable development contributions and conflict sensitivity to become investment criteria. As the EU takes on a wider range of external policy priorities, this would help keep development objectives central to EU external action.
- **Defend differentiation**
  During its EU Presidency, Ireland should resist a financing model in which the Global Gateway, guarantees or blended finance become the default across all partner countries. Fragile contexts often require different combinations of grants, technical assistance, institutional support, and other forms of financing. What works in one context will not necessarily work in another.
- **Strengthen links between humanitarian, development and peace action**
  Ireland can draw on its experience and credibility in humanitarian action and peacebuilding to support closer coordination without compromising humanitarian principles or the distinct mandates of different actors. It should press for the principles set out in the Commission's humanitarian communication to be reflected clearly in the final MFF design.105
- **Keep civil society and local actors at the table**
  The Irish EU Presidency should promote meaningful civil society participation in discussions on the MFF and Global Europe, while also pushing for localisation to be reflected in how future EU funding is designed and delivered. Local organisations should have a role in shaping priorities and decisions, not simply be consulted once those decisions have already been made.

Ireland is unlikely to have the greatest influence through detailed technical amendments alone. Its main contribution can be to use the EU Presidency to build support among Member States for a financing system that protects development objectives, recognises differences between contexts, and leaves space for humanitarian action, peacebuilding, and locally led approaches. Being a broker does not have to mean settling for the lowest common denominator. Ireland can use its credibility to keep these issues visible, even where compromises are unavoidable.106

Conclusion

The next MFF is being negotiated at a difficult moment for European external action. The real test is whether the EU can adapt to a more geopolitical environment without losing a needs-based and differentiated approach. The Integrated Approach to Fragility provides a useful basis for doing so. The EU has accumulated substantial experience with the HDP nexus, joint analysis, multiannual financing, local partnerships and conflict-sensitive approaches. But implementation remains uneven and difficult to scale.

The EU does not necessarily need more policy frameworks. It needs financing arrangements, institutional incentives and accountability mechanisms that make existing commitments work in practice. That means ensuring that its external action remains principled; protecting predictable funding while retaining flexibility; keeping grants available where commercial finance is inappropriate; making conflict sensitivity standard practice; giving conflict prevention and peacebuilding greater visibility; and strengthening local decision-making.

It also means recognising that investment in fragile contexts cannot be assessed only by the amount of capital mobilised or infrastructure delivered. The more difficult question is whether European engagement strengthens the institutions, relationships and capacities that enable societies to manage conflict and shocks over time.

For the Irish Government, this provides a clear Presidency agenda. The objective should not be to argue that geopolitical interests have no place in EU external action. Rather, the Irish Presidency can make the case that the EU's strategic interests are best served when its external financing remains anchored in sustainable development, human rights, conflict prevention and genuine partnership.

The next MFF will determine more than the size of Europe's external financing envelope. It will help shape what European development cooperation looks like over the coming decade — and whether the EU remains willing and able to invest where sustainable development is hardest.

Acknowledgements

With thanks to the following organisations for their invaluable insights:

ActionAid EU Office

ActionAid Ireland

Bureau d'Etudes Scientifiques et Techniques DRC (BEST DRC)

Conflict Management Consulting (CMC)

The European Confederation of Non-Governmental Organisations Working on Sustainable Development and International Cooperation (CONCORD)

Conflict Sensitivity Facility (CSF)

European External Action Service (EEAS)

The European Peacebuilding Liaison Office (EPLO)

GOAL

International Rescue Committee (IRC)

Oxfam Ireland

Saferworld

Trócaire

Voluntary Organisations in Cooperation in Emergencies (VOICE)

World Vision

World Vision Ireland

Endnotes

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Funded by the European Union