



SCIENCE FOR POLICY BRIEF

Addressing conflict and social tensions as root causes of instability and displacement: Lessons learnt from the EU Trust Fund in the Horn of Africa

HIGHLIGHTS

- Analysis of JRC-reviewed EUTF projects reveals that two key strategies were particularly effective in reducing conflict and promoting social cohesion in displacement contexts in the region: delivering justice services through community-based and informal mechanisms, and creating economic opportunities that benefit both displaced and host communities equally.
- There is limited evidence of impact on social cohesion for training of institutional actors and the provision of support to victims of violence, but these interventions raise awareness on key issues and challenge cultural norms, indirectly contributing to conflict mitigation and prevention.
- Effective interventions require a deep understanding of root causes of conflict and displacement, especially context-specific elements, as well as solid and adequate instruments to monitor their evolution and the interventions' impact on them.



CONTEXT

For the past decade, the Horn of Africa (HoA) has been facing persistent political, security, environmental and humanitarian challenges. Conflicts and civil wars, government changes, economic inequalities and climate related shocks have collectively hindered stability and development. In the past decade, Somalia, Sudan and South Sudan have consistently featured among the world's top 10 most fragile countries, while Ethiopia and Eritrea in the top 20¹. The described situation is intertwined with large-scale population movements, including forced displacement and mixed migration flows, both within and from the region.

To address these multifaceted challenges and better manage migration flows, in 2015 the European Union established the European Union Emergency Trust Fund for stability and addressing root causes of irregular migration and displaced persons in Africa (EUTF) in the Horn of Africa, Sahel Lake Chad and North of Africa regions. From a total EUTF budget of €5 billion, the

Horn of Africa region² received an allocation of €1.8 billion across over 94 programmes implemented through 231 projects.³ Besides addressing root causes of displacement and migration, the EUTF was pivotal in providing protection and services to displaced population within or across countries.

The JRC Study

The JRC analysed 47, out of a total of 231 EUTF operational projects, in order to **identify what has worked and what has not in terms of addressing the root causes of forced displacement and irregular migration in the Horn of Africa**. Results and recommendations come from a thorough (desk) meta-analysis of project documents and reports, as well as from exchanges with experts, practitioners and policy makers. More details on the methodology and results can be found in the JRC Technical Report.⁴

RESULTS

This Science for Policy Brief analyses the results in one of the four strategic objectives of the EUTF: improved governance and conflict prevention. The examined projects addressed a range of key issues, including building resilience to environmental and economic shocks, promoting social cohesion between border communities or between displaced and host communities, improving access to justice, and combating gender-based violence.

Despite the varied activities undertaken by the projects, **three distinct categories of interventions emerge**: institutional strengthening, community-wide support, and justice services.

Institutional strengthening efforts often focused on capacity building through training in areas like conflict resolution, human rights, and gender justice. Among these, **conflict resolution training appeared to be more effective than general training on human rights and gender justice**. Targeting diverse groups, including government officials, law enforcement actors and community members,

also amplified impact. Project implementers highlighted the role of trainings on general human rights and gender issues in raising awareness on key issues and challenging cultural norms, hence indirectly contributing to conflict mitigation and prevention.

Projects supporting legislative frameworks and policy development did not report significant outcome-level changes. This is partially due to the complex and fragile context in the HoA, marked by ongoing conflicts, volatile political environment and institutional weaknesses and the longer-term process required for legislative changes.

Most community-wide support interventions had a positive impact on community resilience, increasing community assets and knowledge. However, only half reported an impact on social cohesion. **Interventions that improved economic opportunities were found to promote peaceful coexistence between refugees and host communities** in contexts of protracted displacement as Kenya and Uganda. **Group-based initiatives**, such as farmers' groups

¹ Source: <https://fragilestatesindex.org/global-data/>

² For the purpose of EUTF, the region includes Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Tanzania and Uganda.

³ [EUTF 2024 Annual Report](#)

⁴ JRC, 2025, [Addressing root causes of irregular migration and forced displacement. What works and what does not? Lessons learned from the EUTF in HoA](#),

and savings associations, **were particularly effective** in reducing tensions and fostering community spirit. Practitioners emphasized that dialogue and mediation are important but often insufficient on their own to address complex peacebuilding challenges. Combining them with interventions that address economic drivers of tension is crucial for building social cohesion and peaceful coexistence.

Similarly, **equal access to essential basic services and physical infrastructure proved to be a relevant factor in preventing conflicts over limited shared resources**. For example, the construction of water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) and educational facilities which benefited both refugees and host communities rebalanced the availability of basic services to both groups, resulting in increased cohesion between them, at community level and sometimes even at larger administrative levels.

Together with livelihood support, the provision of justice services was the most promising type of intervention. In particular, projects reported that **informal justice interventions, such as Alternative Dispute Resolution mechanisms** (such as negotiation, mediation and arbitration) **and mobile courts or counselling clinics, demonstrate a higher degree of effectiveness in comparison to formal justice interventions** in what concerns increasing social cohesion and mitigating conflicts. They strengthen community referral systems, create a safe environment for peaceful conflict resolution and mitigate grievances that may have resulted in conflict or violence. Furthermore, the involvement of traditional and religious leaders in informal justice interventions can bring positive effect and contribute to more sustainable and long-lasting results. These activities were also

successful in increasing access to justice for rural and/or marginalised communities and victims of gender-based and sexual gender-based violence. They fostered a more informed and legally empowered community, particularly benefiting women, children, and youth.

Finally, while **interventions targeting victims of violence may not have had a direct impact on peacebuilding or social cohesion**, they nonetheless offered a critical line of protection and helped raise community awareness about the issue. Moreover, by challenging cultural norms that condone violence, these interventions - which included legal aid services, counselling, referral systems, and training for female paralegals - contributed indirectly to mitigating conflict and fostering greater social cohesion.

Box 1: Conflict resolution or prevention?

Available documentation and interviewed project implementers pointed to the fact that **many projects have fallen short in addressing the underlying causes of conflicts, such as access to natural resources and basic services, and weak justice systems**. A common perception is hence that, due to limited analysis, timeframes and resources, projects have focused more on conflict resolution, providing stakeholders with tools to manage conflicts rather than preventing conflict from arising in the first place. However, such a rigid distinction between conflict resolution and prevention is not appropriate in protracted crisis contexts like the Horn of Africa, where many conflicts are long-term, structural, and self-perpetuating. In such a reality, **resolution is often part of prevention**.

Figure 1 – More and less promising approaches for social cohesion, peacebuilding and conflict resolution

More promising approaches	Rather promising approaches	Less promising approaches
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Livelihoods creation • Community-wide support and group-based initiatives • Provide access to essential basic services and physical infrastructure • Informal justice interventions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Institutional strengthening efforts through capacity building • Interventions targeting victims of violence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support to legislative frameworks and policy development

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

The analysis and classification of the effectiveness of approaches conducted has to be considered within limitations. In terms of **contextual factors, arising conflicts, political changes, climate shocks and new inflows of displaced people made the operating environment extremely challenging**, impacting interventions' results. From a project design perspective, social cohesion was rarely considered a primary objective, which means that interventions were not designed with social cohesion outcomes in mind. This resulted in a **lack of adequate context**

(e.g. conflict) analysis, lack of baseline data, as well as limited evaluation or reporting of interventions' impact on social cohesion. In some cases, projects included activities whose results cannot be reasonably assessed during a project timeframe, and even less their impact on social cohesion. This is the case for interventions targeted at legislative and policy frameworks, which are lengthy and complex in nature. Finally, the lack of standard indicators to measure social cohesion made it challenging to assess the impact of interventions.

CONCLUSIONS - GOOD PRACTICES

Several approaches have proven promising in promoting social cohesion and preventing conflicts. From these, a series of good practices can be drawn to inform the design of interventions that are effective, sustainable and conflict sensitive:

- I. **Prioritise specific training on conflict, including education on peacebuilding and conflict resolution.** A common thread among the projects that have had a positive impact is their **targeting of both duty bearers, and the communities they serve.**
- II. **When implementing community-level support interventions, combine dialogue and mediation with economic support,** such as livelihood programmes, to address the root causes of tensions and providing incentives that encourage social cohesion and long-term resilience. The 'peace dividend' approach, which involves the combination of social support systems and infrastructure development to promote economic and social solidarity, can be particularly effective in areas where conflicts are driven by ethnic divisions and scarcity of resources.
- III. **Ensure that interventions guarantee equal access to basic services** such as WASH, education and healthcare for both displaced population⁵ and host communities, to prevent conflicts due to limited resources and promote social cohesion.⁶
- IV. **Integrate protection services for victims of violence,** such as legal assistance, counselling and referral systems, as they can provide crucial support and help mitigate conflict and promote social cohesion. Furthermore, especially in the case of post-conflict interventions, **creating safe spaces for discussion, such as inter-community and inter-generational dialogues,** has proven successful in addressing the concerns and traumas of communities and finding joint solutions.
- V. **Invest in informal justice mechanisms,** involving traditional and religious leaders, as these have shown to be effective in mitigating conflict and providing access to justice for marginalised communities.
- VI. **Work with youth, recognising their fundamental role in preventing conflict and violent extremism.** Frustration, caused by poverty, limited educational and employment opportunities, and corruption, makes young people more susceptible to radicalisation and recruitment into armed and terrorist groups. Targeted interventions that build skills, facilitate access to the labour market, and provide mentoring and conflict resolution training, give youth a sense of direction, ultimately reducing such feelings of frustration.

⁵ For the purpose of this study, the term "displaced population" is used regardless of status, and therefore includes refugees, asylum seekers, internally displaced persons and returnees.

⁶ This is in line with the EU Global Strategy for Foreign and Security Policy and particularly the recognition of inequality and exclusion as primary drivers of conflict.

CONCLUSIONS - POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The promotion of peace and stability has been a fundamental objective of the EUTF, and such commitment will continue beyond its conclusion, as it aligns with the European Union's external action's priorities. As such, the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI) includes provisions for the financing of actions to promote peace, stability and conflict prevention.⁷

Based on evidence and lessons learned from the EUTF experience, the following recommendations are proposed for consideration at a strategic and programming level by both EU actors and implementing partners, with a focus on supporting conflict prevention, peacebuilding, and crisis preparedness.

1. Adopt an integrated approach to conflict prevention and resolution

The 2018 Council Conclusions on the Integrated Approach to External Conflicts and Crises recommend the **adoption of a multilateral, multi-phase, multi-level and multi-dimensional approach**. The NDICI provisions for actions on Peace, Stability and Conflict Prevention point to the same need⁸ and the experience of the EUTF confirms it. In particular, the EUTF analysis shows the relevance of taking an **integrated approach to conflict prevention and resolution**, understood as addressing the full conflict spectrum.

The **multi-phase aspect** could be realised through the implementation of interventions in a timely and sequenced manner, considering both short- and longer-term objectives. At the design stage, projects should **prioritize key issues that can be realistically influenced**, focusing on achievable targets that align with the project's duration. Furthermore, adopting **longer timeframes** for development programmes could allow for a greater focus on addressing structural issues and preventing conflicts. On the other hand, if not combined with long-term financial certainty, the extension of project timeframes can lead to ineffective planning. To mitigate this risk, it is essential to **develop exit strategies that look at the long-term sustainability of actions** and incorporate effective

communication plans to manage stakeholders' expectations and avoid sudden withdrawals that could exacerbate tensions.

The **multidimensional aspect** could be addressed through a **combination of strategies**. These include support for transitional justice and reconciliation, awareness raising and dialogue with institutional and community actors, and interventions that address the economic factors of tensions, such as access to resources and services.

The **multi-level and multilateral approach** could be implemented through the design of projects that simultaneously engage various stakeholders and operate at different levels. Effective peacebuilding and conflict resolution require a nuanced understanding of complex societal interactions and tailored, collaborative interventions to address specific contextual needs and challenges. Adapting objectives and interventions to the local context, **taking into account the unique cultural and ethnographic characteristics of local populations**, is therefore key. **Collaboration with local organisations and governments** through Memoranda of Understanding can help ensure that interventions are sustainable and aligned with local priorities. Additionally, **fostering collaboration between community and government entities**, can further enhance project effectiveness. This also include exploring the option of localisation⁹ to ensure the sustainability of achievements in the long term.

2. Ensure continuously updated context analyses to inform programming and adjustments

In line with the NDICI regulation, it is essential to conduct **comprehensive and continuous context analysis** to inform programming and ensure conflict sensitivity. This involves ongoing monitoring of the structural drivers of conflict, such as governance, political participation, land and property rights, and barriers to access to justice and human rights. Regular assessments of new government policies and their potential impact on conflict dynamics and social cohesion are also necessary to ensure that EU

⁷ NDICI-Global Europe Regulation, Annex III.

⁸ Multi-Annual Indicative Programme, NDICI- Global Europe – Thematic Programme on Peace, Stability and Conflict Prevention, 2021 – 2027

⁹ I.e. strengthening the capacity and resources of local organisations to respond to crises and promote long-term sustainability. See: https://civil-protection-humanitarian-aid.ec.europa.eu/what/humanitarian-aid/localisation_en

engagements are evidence-based, timely, and effective. To maximize resources and impact, **strategic partnerships with specialised peacebuilding organisations** can also be established, leveraging their expertise in conflict analysis and resolution, particularly in the context of forced displacement.

Additionally, as per the 2020 EU conflict analysis guidance note¹⁰, **scenario planning** for potential future conflicts is crucial in anticipating and mitigating their impact. This involves envisioning worst-case and best-case scenarios, including various types of violence such as violent protests, election-related violence, war crimes, and violent extremism. A comprehensive analysis should consider conflict risks at multiple levels, dissecting local, national, and regional dynamics. A key area of focus should be the link between conflicts and social cohesion, which requires further investigation to understand the interplay between the two.

3. Establish tailored and comprehensive monitoring and evaluation (M&E) system

To assess the effectiveness of social cohesion and conflict resolution interventions, it is vital to **design and finance comprehensive M&E systems that are specifically tailored to these types of interventions**. This could involve developing technical guidance on assessing outcomes related to social cohesion and peace interventions, in collaboration with experts and key partners. Such assessments could incorporate qualitative indicators, such as attitude-based measures of trust between community members, and utilise data from traditional justice registries to monitor conflict resolution outcomes.

Effective project implementation also requires a **context-specific monitoring framework**. This should include community-driven success indicators that reflect local values and priorities, as well as baseline studies and regular monitoring to track changes over time and adapt the programmatic response.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This science for policy brief is part of a series of three thematic briefs that complement the JRC Technical Report "*Addressing root causes of irregular migration and forced displacement. What works and what does not? Lessons learned from the EUTF in HoA*". The four products are part of a larger study jointly carried out by DG INTPA and JRC E.5 Unit.

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¹⁰ EEAS-DG INTPA, [2020 Guidance Note on the Use of Conflict Analysis in Support of EU External Action](#)