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How to improve EU actions to resolve crises beyond its borders

Researchers have analysed the EU's crisis and conflict response mechanisms to make them more sensitive, efficient and sustainable.



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In an increasingly complex and uncertain security environment, there's a growing demand for the EU to play a more strategic role in responding to crises and conflict. As part of its Common Security and Defence Policy, the EU performs various tasks such as humanitarian and rescue operations, crisis management, peacemaking, conflict prevention and post-conflict stabilisation.

To achieve its goals, the EU deploys both civilian missions and military operations. It has launched over 35 such missions and operations on 3 continents since the conflict in the western Balkans in the 1990s. But have they been successful? Supported by the EU-funded EUNPACK project, researchers have examined how the EU's actions are received on the ground in target countries.

In an [opinion article](#)  on the website of pan-European media network EURACTIV, Bård Drange, Junior Research Fellow at the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs, argues that despite good intentions, results are mixed. He highlights five paradoxes that need to be addressed by the EU “to effectively respond to crises and conflicts beyond its borders.” The first paradox is related to the challenges of building local ownership of missions with support from political elites. “This can be problematic, especially in countries in conflict, where the legitimacy of the national leadership may be highly contested, and where the distance between elites and people on the ground is vast.”

The second paradox is that interventions usually have a Brussels-based design instead of being “based on an in-depth analysis of local dynamics and root causes of the conflict.” He says: “Hence, responses are not tailor-made to the needs of the people in question. Instead, the EU’s response is very much made in Brussels based on limited consultations with those whose rights it wishes to protect or promote.”

The third paradox is about whether or not the EU’s crisis response is demand- or supply-driven. Drange notes that despite its endeavour to offer a demand-driven crisis response addressing the needs of the population in conflict zones, the EU’s own interests usually drive its response. “The EU gets involved on its own promises – building state authority or curbing migration – which are not always what local stakeholders and people on the ground want and need.” Explaining the fourth paradox and highlighting in particular Afghanistan, Iraq and Mali, he explains that “the EU seeks to build state capacity to deal with various armed groups. However, with an increasingly militarized response, it fails to solve root causes and raise chances of a political solution and reconciliation.” He adds: “The fifth paradox is that while EU preaches long-term solutions and seeks to build sustainable peace, in practice it often does short-term conflict management.”

Limited impact

The same piece suggests that these paradoxes – that also exist in cases other than Afghanistan, Iraq and Mali – restrict the EU’s influence on the ground. “It is also important to note that the EU is not alone; many other international engagements frequently suffer from these shortcomings.”

Research conducted under the EUNPACK (Good intentions, mixed results – A conflict sensitive unpacking of the EU comprehensive approach to conflict and crisis mechanisms) covered interviews with local and international organisations and agencies, as well as surveys on the ground in areas where the EU operates. The project analysed the disparity between the EU’s intentions and implementation, and the gap between implementation and local perceptions.

For more information, please see:

[EUNPACK project website](#) 

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