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Engaging in Fragile Settings: Acknowledging the Cost of Inaction

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On September 30th, 2024, the Egmont Institute, the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), and the Centre for Humanitarian Action (CHA) convened a panel of experts from the humanitarian assistance, development, and peace sectors to assess the new working environment of the incoming European Commission and discuss its implication for the EU response to fragility. The discussion occurred days after the release of mission letters to Commissioners-designate, and provided an opportunity to assess how the EU, with its new structures and priorities, could sustain engagement in fragile contexts. This paper aims to restate some of the findings and recommendations that emerged during the exchanges, focusing on pathways and instruments for more effective structural responses to fragility during this decisive period.

Various definitions of fragility coexist, but they all share a common trait: describing contexts that are particularly vulnerable to shocks and exhibit limited resilience. These shocks can arise from armed conflicts, climatic incidents such as droughts or floods, or from the collapse of systems that had become dependent on international aid. Over time, EU international aid, whether through humanitarian assistance, early recovery efforts, or stabilisation initiatives has been working as a buffer to absorb or balance changes in these systems.

In the context of a global aid funding crunch, shifting development funds away from fragile areas is likely to prevent populations from developing essential resilience

mechanisms that have allowed them to resist shocks until now. Without external support, vulnerable populations may sometimes have no choice but to develop negative coping mechanisms such as joining extremist groups, abandoning their land to seek a more appropriate environment, or increasingly competing for resources and thus generating tensions with neighbours.

SUPPORTING FRAGILE COMMUNITIES IS IN EUROPE'S INTEREST

Recent and consistent announcements of significant official development assistance (ODA) cuts by the EU and major donors signal a substantial de-prioritisation and a de facto abandonment of long-term commitments to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). They raise concerns about what appears to be a shift away from Europe's solidarity commitments in fragile contexts, in favour of investment opportunities and economic interests.

However, allowing fragile contexts to descend into poverty or chaos carries multiple risks beyond the immediate humanitarian toll on large, vulnerable populations. It could negatively impact European interests, including **security, economic stability, political credibility, and reputation**. Disengagement from regions like the Sahel may lead to state collapse and regional instability, driving populations to radicalise or flee, thus exacerbating risks of growing extremism and migration flows towards Europe. Withdrawing investments from these regions could limit access to natural resources and harm EU economic interests.

Disengaging from fragile contexts could also weaken Europe's ability and credibility to build partnerships by affecting neighbouring countries in which the EU is interested in investing. As such, potential repercussions of instability such as violent extremism or massive refugee influxes could undermine initiatives promoted by the Global Gateway. Furthermore, disengagement leaves a vacuum that may allow EU competitors to expand their influence in these strategic regions, heightening geopolitical tensions. Failing to act and neglecting or sidelining fragile contexts will undoubtedly have major broader implications in the long run. The EU should thus seek an integrated and updated approach to engage effectively in these contexts.

PROMOTING A CONTEXT-SPECIFIC, LOCALLY LED RESPONSE AND REAFFIRMING THE ROLE OF A NEXUS-BASED APPROACH

Fragile settings are far from monolithic: they encompass a variety of crises, each with unique causes and implications. There is therefore no “one size fits all” solution: each context presents distinct needs that require tailored responses. Funding strategies in fragile states should thus be area-specific, grounded in local realities, and avoid overly ambitious or generic goals.

In the past, approaches such as ‘addressing conflict and climate risks in the Sahel’ were well-intentioned but ultimately too broad, costly, and eventually ineffective. Instead, targeted initiatives that address specific challenges can yield more tangible outcomes. **Contextualising responses can facilitate an area-based approach**, which supports localisation through collaboration with local civil society—even in estranged contexts (e.g. Afghanistan).

Humanitarian, development, and peace instruments should be articulated along the nexus by **reinforcing the role of EU Delegations to better coordinate the efforts of EU Member States along a Team Europe Approach**, seeking the local integration of financial instruments. The various instruments complement each other but operate within different timelines and structures. The idea is not

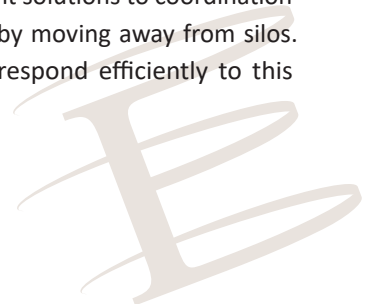
to merge them but rather to recognise their specificities and coordinate their use effectively. Establishing different funding layers—urgent, short-term, and long-term—with the help of development, humanitarian aid, and peace actors, will allow addressing the root causes of crises and conflicts, thereby helping to *drain the bathtub* of current crises related to fragility.

ENSURING ROBUST AND EFFECTIVE COORDINATION FROM BRUSSELS

The fragmentation of instruments across different services leaves many fragile situations overlooked. Current instruments are no longer suited to address the complex challenges of fragile contexts, which demand a **comprehensive and coordinated European response supported by appropriately adapted funding mechanisms**. Simple and efficient instruments must be developed to ensure coherence. With only two years remaining before the vote on the next EU Budget (Multiannual Financial Framework) and just a few months before its first draft is presented, the European Commission must urgently define an effective, integrated strategy to address fragility.

The mentions of a “*Commission-wide integrated approach to fragility*”, and the support for a “*differentiated approach*” in the mission letters of Commissioners-designate Hadja Lahbib and Jozef Síkela respectively must be welcomed. To be followed by effect, the High Representative/Vice President will need to ensure discipline among all concerned Directorates-General and control that **all aspects related to fragile contexts are indeed integrated and implemented**. Upcoming parliamentary hearings will have to reflect this necessity with Commissioners-designate H. Lahbib and J. Síkela but also, and most importantly, with Kaja Kallas.

The political will to address fragility must be strong and visible and embraced as **Team Europe**: involving EU institutions and Member States. There is an urgency to find better and more coherent solutions to coordination and complementarity, thereby moving away from silos. The capacity of the EU to respond efficiently to this



challenge will depend on its ability to **develop a sound strategy where fragility will be embedded in the foreign policy agendas.**

CONCLUSION: REPRIORITISING THE RESPONSE TO FRAGILITY IN THE EU FOREIGN AGENDA

In light of major political events in 2024 and 2025, it is crucial to underscore the **urgency of investing time, political capital, and financial resources into fragile crises in an increasingly transactional global context.** It is indeed unlikely that major powers, including the USA, the EU, and its Member States, will continue to invest the same level of effort in these contexts as they did in the past based solely on the principle of international solidarity and global development goals.

In an environment where the ambition to meet the SDGs has lived, the alternative cannot be purely pragmatic, leaving vulnerable populations in fragile countries without support. Such an approach would disregard an essential aspect of the equation: **the cost of inaction.**

The success of an EU international partnership strategy geared towards securing robust investments on infrastructures will depend on the ability of the EU to articulate this Global Gateway approach with a sustained engagement in fragile settings.

As the EU is redefining its priorities and portfolios, now is a decisive moment for setting the tone on fragility. **The political will to address fragility must be strong and visible,** not only at the EU level but also within Member States. The next European Humanitarian Forum (EHF) in May 2025 will be a key moment to assess efforts in prioritising Europe's response to fragile contexts.

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