

What EU Comprehensive Approach?

Challenges for the EU action plan and beyond

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Key messages

- The need for comprehensive and coordinated responses by the EU to address sustainable development, peace and security, especially in complex fragile situations, is widely accepted. However, despite progress in a number of areas, EU's track record in seeking agreement and implementing comprehensive approaches is a long history of unfinished business, postponed priorities and failed attempts.
- Taking a comprehensive approach is inevitably a complex and difficult task, even more so at the EU level. Understanding the constraints and difficulties faced by the EU in the past is critical to inform current efforts towards an Action Plan on the Comprehensive Approach that helps define the "what", and the "how" in ways that are realistic and strengthen the EU's added-value and the effectiveness of its external action.
- The new Juncker Commission commitment to advance team work and ensure greater policy coherence and political drive for EU action are an opportunity to address essential political, organisational and operational challenges for the EU. The Action Plan on the Comprehensive Approach, expected in 2015, could be the occasion to define how this is to be taken forward by EU institutions and member states.

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1. Background to a longstanding issue

The need for comprehensive responses is widely accepted as a means to address and consolidate sustainable development, peace and security, especially in complex fragile situations. It has been shaping international policy discourses and approaches to fragility and conflict, not least in the European Union (EU). A number of EU policy documents, especially over the last decade, acknowledge that security and development challenges are inter-twinned, and that the EU is well equipped to address these challenges comprehensively, given its wide array of policies and instruments. While this gives the EU a comparative advantage in international politics, it also makes EU foreign policy a far more complex process than for most other international actors.

The EU's external action involves a multitude of actors – including 28 member states, each with its own national priorities and administrations – with different and sometimes conflicting objectives and political priorities, distinct mandates and ways of operating, diverse experiences and perspectives, specific guiding principles and rules, separate financial instruments and mechanisms with diverse timeframes. Getting agreement on a shared strategy and effectively coordinating and implementing a Comprehensive Approach is a daunting task under pressure to deliver amidst the complexities and difficulties of operating in fragile and crisis or conflict contexts. Yet, failing to provide coherent, coordinated and context-driven responses may do harm and undermine the credibility of the EU as an external actor, as well as the impact of its aid, more than half of which goes to fragile contexts.

The issue is not whether to take a Comprehensive Approach, but how to do it. What are the essential requirements for a EU comprehensive approach to external action? What does it take for EU actors to agree on a shared strategy? How to put into practice an articulated whole-of-EU strategy, particularly in fragile countries and regions marked by transition, instability and conflict? How to bring together the EU's different actors, instruments and policy tools such as diplomacy, security, development, trade and other relevant policies (including those of the member states) in a coherent, flexible and mutually supportive manner? Given the EU's complexity, what is the level of ambition or degree of comprehensiveness that EU actors can or should be realistically aiming for?

The discussion on these critical challenges has regained new momentum in the EU with the recent Communication on the Comprehensive Approach¹ and the related Council Conclusions of May 2014, which renewed calls for an Action Plan on how to implement an EU Comprehensive Approach and which structures should lead in that process.² As EU institutions and actors prepare to move further in this discussion, it is useful to keep in mind that this is not a new debate in the EU, nor is it the first time the EU has discussed an Action Plan for a EU Comprehensive Approach to external action in fragile and conflict-affected contexts. Little reference is made to these earlier debates and efforts, either because few of the actors currently involved have that institutional memory, or because such discussions have been outdated by progress and/or institutional changes brought by the Lisbon Treaty, and do not include the views and roles of the European External Action Service (EEAS) established in December 2010.

¹ High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and the European Commission, *The EU's Comprehensive Approach to external conflict and crisis*, Joint communication to the European Parliament and the Council, 11.12.2013, JOIN (2013) 30 final.

² Foreign Affairs Council, *Council Conclusions on the EU's Comprehensive Approach*, Brussels, 12.05.2014.

“The comprehensive approach is both a general working method and a set of concrete measures and processes to improve how the EU, based on a common strategic vision and drawing on its wide array of existing tools and instruments, collectively can develop, embed and deliver more coherent and more effective policies, working practices, actions and results. (...) The need for such a comprehensive approach is most acute in crisis and conflict situations and in fragile states”.

Source: Council Conclusions on the EU's Comprehensive Approach, 12.05.2014

The purpose of this paper

It is useful that EU actors are aware and reminded of the progress made over these last few years, as well as the constraints and difficulties, the EU faced in the past. The current institutional landscape is undoubtedly different, and continues to evolve as the new Commission prepares to take office. In fact, institutional changes and reorganisation are part of the EU's response to addressing the essence of the challenges faced by the EU when trying to take an integrated or comprehensive approach to external action. These essentially unchanged challenges are first and foremost related to coordination, coherence and political leadership, and are born out of the nature of the EU as a multi-institutional and pluri-national organisation, with all that entails in terms of roles, objectives, ways of operating and the multitude of interests or priorities at play. But they are also related to contexts, especially in situations of fragility, crisis and conflict, which are independent from internal EU structures or politics, and pose formidable challenges to EU capacity and the effectiveness of EU policies.

This Briefing Note contextualises the EU debate on the Comprehensive Approach, and gives an overview of recent analysis of the challenges it still faces. It also addresses the diverse understanding among EU actors of what is the EU Comprehensive Approach, and how that affects expectations for an Action Plan to provide more clarity on how this is to be implemented. It assesses areas of consensus and key underlying challenges for making progress on those areas. Finally, it proposes some ‘food for thought’ and ways forward on what kind of Comprehensive Approach can the EU realistically aim at and sustain, and what are some of the options and opportunities to advance on the EU's quest for a more coherent and integrated approach to external action.

2. Tracing back the EU's narrative on the Comprehensive Approach

As early as 1996, an European Commission (EC) communication on conflicts in Africa was discussing a comprehensive approach to conflict prevention, peacebuilding and to promoting structural stability in Africa. A decade later, there were efforts to develop preventive strategies, but they never took off. Over the last decade in particular, the EU has been giving greater attention to the need for an integrated or ‘whole-of-EU’ approach to security and development in fragile and conflict contexts. The European Security Strategy in 2003 and its 2008 implementation review stress the need for using EU policies and instruments in a more coherent and coordinated manner to respond to interconnected security and development challenges. EU institutions and member states commitment to Policy Coherence for Development (PCD)³ is an expression

³ In the European Consensus on Development adopted in December 2005, the EU committed to PCD in twelve policy areas that could accelerate progress towards the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), and improve the effectiveness of EU assistance to developing countries. In 2009, out of operational ‘realism’, the EU agreed to five priority areas for PCD: trade and finance, climate change, food security, migration and security.

of EU's attempt to minimise contradictions and to build synergies between policies that have an impact on developing countries, other than development cooperation – a legal obligation as per the EU treaties.⁴

In 2007, during the Portuguese Presidency of the EU, there was a large debate, and strong commitment to identify operational solutions to adapting EU policy and operational responses to situations of fragility, and enhance the security-development nexus.⁵ An EC Communication and Council Conclusions on Fragility, and Council Conclusions on Security and Development were produced. These documents identify priority areas for action and call for a 'whole-of-EU' approach' that combine political, diplomatic, security, development and humanitarian instruments when addressing fragility.⁶ Subsequent Commission communications reaffirmed the EU's commitment to better articulate EU policies and instruments to address the challenges and specificities of fragile contexts.⁷

The 2007 Council Conclusions (and subsequent policy documents) point to **organisational challenges to a whole-of-EU approach** to effective external action:

- Coordination between EU actors at headquarters and field level;
- Information exchange;
- Joint analysis (context and risk analysis);
- Identifying comparative advantages between EU actors and with regard to international partners or donors;
- Human resources capacities and incentives.

The debate in 2007 incentivised progress in a number of areas, but these challenges are still insufficiently addressed today. They are precisely what the new Commission of Mr. Juncker has vowed to address, through a more political leadership and a clearer hierarchy of coordination roles and veto powers within the college of Commissioners that includes the High Representative as a full member in its capacity of Vice-President.

3. Progress and hurdles towards a EU Action Plan

The 2007 Council Conclusions requested the Commission to produce Action Plans, informed by analysis based on country case studies, with a view to implementing the actions set out in its Conclusions.⁸ After

⁴ Article 208.1 of the consolidated version of the Treaties as amended by the Lisbon Treaty, Brussels, 12.11.2012.

⁵ This was a priority of the Portuguese Presidency of the EU in the second-half of 2007, who commissioned a study aimed at informing the debate and providing inputs into related EU policy deliberations: Faria F. and Magalhães Ferreira, P., *Situations of Fragility: Challenges for a European response Strategy*, ECDPM and IEEI, 2007

⁶ The Council conclusions on Security and Development, following a joint EC/Council Secretariat paper on the same issue, identify actions for increased coherence in the following areas that span the nexus: strategic planning, security sector reform (SSR), partnerships with regional and sub-regional organisations, and humanitarian aid and security. The Council Conclusions on Fragility are more general and call for approaches that go beyond these priority areas for the nexus, making reference to policy coherence for development and putting prevention, statebuilding and democratic governance high on the priority list of EU policies to address fragility. They also make a number of recommendations regarding financial instruments, programming and organisational issues.

⁷ Namely the EC Communications on An Agenda for Change, Budget Support, Transitions, Resilience, Disaster Risk Reduction, engagement with Civil Society in external relations, amongst others.

⁸ Two separate studies were commissioned by the EC in 2008: (i) *Mapping of donors, actors, financial instruments and assessment tools in situations of fragility* (by the former DG DEV) using as 'pilot' countries Burundi, Guinea-Bissau, Haiti, Sierra Leone, Timor-Leste and Yemen; and (ii) *Study on Security and Development* (by the former DG RELEX) that looked into the country/situation cases of Aceh/Indonesia, Afghanistan, Central African Republic, Chad, Colombia and South Africa. These studies informed respectively the elaboration of two separate Action Plans: on Fragility (led by DG DEV) and on Security and Development (led by DG RELEX and the Council Secretariat). These two work streams were later merged into a single Action Plan on Fragility and Conflict (2010) that was however shelved, as the EEAS was being set-up.

lengthy intra and inter-institutional discussions, a joint EC/Council Secretariat Action Plan draft on Security, Fragility and Development was to be presented to the Council in 2010, but the process stalled as the EEAS was created. Whether it stalled because it was not considered opportune to commit to such an Action Plan at a time when a new service was being set-up and roles, mandates and inter-institutional relations were being redefined;⁹ or because there were pressing foreign policy priorities to attend to, with the Arab Spring events unfolding, there was clearly no 'political sponsorship' for an Action Plan at the top levels in the EEAS and possibly not enough in the Commission.¹⁰

Notwithstanding the fact that the Action Plan was not brought to the Council, efforts to address the challenges and implement actions identified in the 2007 Council Conclusions had already been on-going and have continued since (see box 1). The 2010 Action Plan draft was not defined in a vacuum. It was informed by analysis of what was not working by existing – albeit not systematic – good practices by EU actors. It came about at a moment when the institutional set-up was being redesigned, including through reforms within the Commission itself in its Humanitarian Aid (ECHO) and Development Cooperation (DEVCO) departments, and in the creation of a new external relations service. There was a general sense that inter-institutional dialogue and cooperation at top level regressed during the early days of the establishment of the EEAS. As a recent European Court of Auditors report points out, the establishment of the EEAS was inadequately prepared and its tasks ill-defined,¹¹ which had inevitable consequences on intra and inter-institutional relations. There was confusion about institutional roles and no adequate inter-institutional division of labour and coordination mechanisms, which contributed to a sense of institutional competition, rather than complementarity.

There has been *de facto* important progress in the EU policy framework and instruments towards a more integrated approach to fragile and complex environments.¹² The articulation of policies and the use of multiple instruments to facilitate coordination and synergies between activities across policy areas is now part of the policy mantra. Various studies and evaluations of EU external action policies and instruments have found that, over the last decade, the EU has been engaged more substantially (both in qualitative and in financial terms) and more systematically in conflict prevention and peace building, security sector reform or human rights, through a variety of state and non-state actors, instruments and in ways that are meaningful to the context and the local actors' priorities.¹³

Nonetheless, these studies and analysis also highlight policy inconsistencies and gaps on how integrated approaches are designed and implemented, and how a persistent culture of 'working in silos', a lack of incentives to work differently, limited human resources and capacity constraints all have reduced the opportunities for linkages between policies and activities. The extents to which these are articulated in ways that are consistent, timely and most relevant to the context still vary greatly and inconsistently in EU practice. The coordination across institutional actors and whether clear political strategy and leadership guide EU action is equally uneven.

⁹ Other views, including that of the author, is that the Action Plan could have been an opportunity to 'test' and guide the new institutional set-up in light of what are some of the main challenges of working in fragile states. Faria, F., [The 'fragile states' debate: an opportunity to refocus EU's foreign policy and institutions](#), in ECDPM blog Talking Points, 29.07.2011.

¹⁰ See Sherriff A. and Hauck, V., "[Will the Action Plan to Implement the EU's Comprehensive Approach Have Any Bite?](#)", *ECDPM Talking Points blog*, 23.05.2014, which also discuss challenges of the proposed Action Plan.

¹¹ European Court of Auditors, *The establishment of the European External Action Service*, Special Report, 2014.

¹² A useful overview of progress in adapting EU Institutional assets to respond to conflict and fragility is provided by Sherriff, A., and V. Hauck in [A more peaceful and secure world: a more effective response to conflict and security](#), DIE, ECDPM, FRIDE, ODI, 2014.

¹³ For instance the evaluation of the IfS-Crisis Preparedness Component 2007-2013 (2014); the EEAS review (2013); the 2011 evaluations on JSSR and on CPPB; studies by DG DEVCO on the security-development nexus in fragile contexts conducted in 2013, amongst others.

Box 1: Building up tools and mechanisms for a Comprehensive Approach

A non-exhaustive listing of reforms and efforts aimed at promoting or enabling a more coherent and coordinated EU approach to address the security-development nexus in fragile contexts across the EU institutions, policies and instruments, include:

- The development of joint policy documents outlining shared political priorities and strategies to address security and development challenges at regional and/or national level (e.g. Horn of Africa, Sahel, Great Lakes, Somalia, South Sudan) –, albeit with a mixed record in terms of their comprehensiveness, implementation, coordination and clarity of purpose;
- Greater harmonisation and simplification of EU financing rules and procedures through a “common implementing regulation” under the Multi-Annual Financial Framework (MFF) 2014-2020.
- Greater flexibility in the new financial regulations for the EU external action instruments (heading IV of the EU budget and the EDF-European Development Fund), including the possibility to fund activities that are not ODA eligible namely through the Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace (IcSP, formerly known as IfS-Instrument for Stability, established in 2006). This comes in addition to the flexible procedures for crisis countries, in place since 2008. The EC has furthermore created instruments or financing facilities for quick responses and to bridge short- and long-term activities (e.g. the IcSP) and to allow the EU to provide critical support to peacekeeping capacity and operations by African partners (the Africa Peace Facility of the EDF). The EU has also agreed to the possibility of establishing EU Trust Funds (thematic or geographic) to allow the EC to manage pools of funds from the EC and Member States, with maximum flexibility within the Official Development Assistance (ODA) rules.
- Greater flexibility in the EU programming process in fragility contexts to allow for a swift response to changing circumstances (e.g. ad-hoc reviews, accelerated procedures for timely responses to sudden changes; longer or shorter programming periods to allow synchronisation with partner countries planning).
- Improved information exchange and knowledge sharing across the institutions. Illustrative examples include: joint fact-finding missions; joint trainings involving often two or more services (e.g. DEVCO, EEAS, ECHO, the FPI-Foreign Policy Instruments service) on fragility, the security-development nexus and relevant policy areas (e.g. conflict prevention and peacebuilding, mediation, crisis management); the development of tools like the Index for Risk Management; greater communication and some degree of integration between ‘crisis rooms’ in different EU services. However, the duplication of structures dealing with situational awareness and crisis analysis is at best confusing, leading to frictions both within and between institutions and lack of clarity on who is responsible for activating crisis responses, making coordination the more difficult.
- Gradually seeking a more systematic and structured approach to context analysis through the development of guidance, methodologies and/or support tools in order to enhance fragility and conflict-related expertise and capacity at EU Delegations (EUDs) and headquarters, namely for Linking Relief, Rehabilitation and Development (LRRD), Resilience, Conflict Analysis, Political Economy Analysis, Justice and Security Sector Reform (JSSR), Early Warning and Mediation. Other tools are also being developed with international partners, like the Post-Disaster Needs Assessment/Post-Conflict Needs Assessment methodology (PDNA/PCNA, with the UNDP and the World Bank) or the indicators for Peacebuilding and Statebuilding Goals and the Fragility Assessments in the framework of the New Deal.
- Coordination mechanisms (formal and informal) and structures have been set up at different levels of the EU system for exchange, coordination and joint work (e.g. the Inter-service groups on Transitions or on JSSR). With regard to crisis response, an EEAS Crisis Response System, activated through the EEAS Department for Crisis Response and Operational Coordination, was set-up. It brings together the Crisis Platform, the EU Situation Room and the Crisis Management Board to ensure the mobilisation and coordination of EU actors and instruments across the EU system. In ECHO, the Emergency Response Coordination Centre (ERCC) is the operational coordination hub of the EU Civil Protection Mechanism for European responses to emergencies inside and outside Europe. Other crisis response mechanisms exist also within other EC services, making it a fragmented system and raising questions with regard to its cost and operational effectiveness.

The rationale for the initial attempt at an Action Plan on Security, Fragility and Development in 2009-2010, or for the call for an Action Plan to operationalise the 2013 joint EC/High Representative communication on the EU's Comprehensive Approach is the same - i.e. to address the persisting gaps and inconsistencies in EU's external action and ensure the full and effective use of the existing potential of EU policies, instruments and mechanisms for a comprehensive, flexible and sequenced approach, combining short and long term responses. While many of the gaps and challenges remain the same, the EU institutional set up is now different, and in many ways more complex. The changes brought by the Treaty of Lisbon (2009) were meant to promote greater coherence and synergies between the wide range of EU policies and instruments for external action, but also added complexity to the decision-making process and coordination for external action.

4. The EU institutional set-up post-Lisbon treaty: a 'step forward' or a 'step backwards'?

EU foreign policy has always been the remit of Member States, especially when it comes to crisis management, but the institutional roles for external action are increasingly spread in intricate ways across the EU system.

The Commission has an important role in the development and implementation of policies that have a bearing on EU external action like development, trade, but also fisheries, environment, energy or migration. It is a major humanitarian and development donor and a supporter of activities like security sector reform, human rights, mediation, or the development of peace and security capacities of African regional organisations and the African Union, amongst other. It has an important role in the coordination of the European emergency response system in humanitarian crisis or disasters inside and outside Europe. Furthermore, the Commission is responsible for the management of EU financial instruments, including for external action.

Since the establishment of the EEAS in December 2010, civilian and military crisis management structures migrated from the Council into the EEAS, the new hybrid service that brings together officials from the Commission, the Council Secretariat and member states diplomats. The EEAS was created to enhance and coordinate EU external action, under the steering of the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice-President of the Commission (HR). The HR is responsible for ensuring the consistency of the Union's external action¹⁴ and for coordinating the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) of the EU. The network of 139 Delegations that represent now the whole of the EU are under the political authority and responsibility of the HR, but financial instruments managed by DEVCO cover the largest share of the budget and staff in EUDs. The EEAS is also responsible, alongside DEVCO (through the EUDs and in Brussels) for the definition of the programming priorities, and thus also of the financing priorities, to the extent these are largely the result of the programming process. Disputed views between DEVCO, Foreign Policy Instruments Service (FPI) and the Commission, as well as with partner countries, on programming and what, how and when to finance, have not been uncommon during the first experience of the programming process for 2014-2020.¹⁵

¹⁴ Article 18.4 of the Treaty on the European Union.

¹⁵ See namely Herrero, A., Galeazzi, G., Krätke, [Early experiences in programming EU aid 2014-2020: Charting the Agenda for Change](#). (ECDPM Briefing Note 54). ECDPM, 2013; and Furness, M., *Lets Get Comprehensive: The EU's Engagement with Fragile and Conflict Affected Countries*, Discussion Paper 5/14, German Development Institute, 2014.

All these EU institutional actors, in their respective roles and competencies, have therefore important roles to play. As per the Treaty on the European Union (TEU), they all have a shared responsibility in driving a more coherent and integrated approach to EU external action in the current institutional set-up.¹⁶

As stated in the joint Communication of December 2013 and reiterated by member states in their related Council Conclusions, the EU Comprehensive Approach implies not only the joined-up deployment of EU instruments and resources, but also a shared responsibility of both EU actors at different levels and member states in capitals and on the ground. How is this shared responsibility to be put into practice?

There is no single institutional body or mechanism that has a lead role in supporting and coordinating the EU Comprehensive Approach. For instance in the UK, the Cabinet of Ministers under the leadership of the Prime Minister performs a similar function, working towards a comprehensive approach by all the different government ministries, who all attend its meetings. Yet these issues are also addressed in small meetings of UK Cabinet members such as the National Security Council. For the EU, a review of the current institutional status quo is unlikely – as stated both in the joint Communication and in the Council Conclusions, the comprehensive approach is to be put into practice in the respect of EU actors' roles, mandates and added-value – but there is nonetheless scope to improve coordination and promote leadership, a task the new Juncker Commission appears determined to pursue.

5. Towards a shared understanding of the EU Comprehensive Approach?

The joint Communication by the EU High Representative and the Commission was a positive step towards clarifying EU actors understanding of the comprehensive approach. In this document, the EC and HR/EEAS committed to a Comprehensive Approach that “covers all stages of the cycle of conflict or other external crisis; through early warning and preparedness, conflict prevention, crisis response and management to early recovery, stabilisation and peacebuilding in order to help countries getting back on track towards sustainable and long term development”.¹⁷

The communication defines eight measures – and some concrete actions for each measure – to enhance coherence and effectiveness of EU external action:

1. Develop a shared analysis of the situation or challenge;
2. Define a common strategic vision;
3. Focus on prevention;
4. Mobilise the different strengths and capacities of the EU;
5. Commit to the long term;
6. Link internal and external policies and action;
7. Make better use of the role of EU Delegations; and
8. Work in partnership with other international and regional actors.

These measures and actions set basic and critical requirements for a comprehensive approach to EU's external action, and especially in fragile situations (not only in crisis and conflict). Although the Communication stresses conflict prevention, its focus is largely on conflict situations and crisis

¹⁶ Article 21.3 of the TEU states: “The Union shall ensure consistency between the different areas of its external action and between these and its other policies. The Council and the Commission, assisted by the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, shall ensure that consistency and shall cooperate to that effect.”

¹⁷ HR and EC 2013, p.2.

management. But how can the EU effectively uphold its commitment to conflict prevention if the comprehensive approach is limited to conflict and crisis? The Communication lacks the ambition of applying those critical requirements upstream of crisis situations and seeking a more coherent and better coordinated EU external action, linking broader security and development concerns and objectives, in all contexts.

The European Council has in fact underlined a broader view and understanding of the Comprehensive Approach in its related Council Conclusions, which reflect the opinion and advice of various Council working bodies.¹⁸ It defines the comprehensive approach both in terms of processes (i.e. how the EU operates) and in results or effectiveness (see definition in section 1 of this note). Its renewed call for an Action Plan for the implementation of the comprehensive approach is indicative that despite the commitments and some progress, there is still need to clarify the scope, modalities and mechanisms for joint work between EU actors.¹⁹ The Communication per se does not in fact provide EU actors with the systems, mechanisms or the means to put it into practice. It defines actions that can effectively enable more EU joined-up work, but as some analysis point out “it does not set out very concrete and tangible structures and processes on who and with whom the Union should work when, where and how”.²⁰

Having failed to respond to such expectations, the joint Communication may have ended up deepening the scepticism as to the will and capacity of EU institutional actors to effectively work more jointly. Some member states sense there is no real commitment within the EU institutions to take this forward, recalling the failure to come up with an Action Plan requested by the Council in late 2007, and fear the Comprehensive Approach will remain an occasional and/or discretionary process. EU institutional actors, on the other hand, argue that the basic steps towards a comprehensive approach are laid down in the joint communication, and that how to implement it depends on each specific context, and on the nature and degree of EU engagement. They fear that detailing, out of context, the steps and processes needed to operationalise the Comprehensive Approach risk being a lengthy bureaucratic process that will create a procedural ‘straight-jacket’ that can limit the institutions ability to respond in a timely fashion. This ultimately results in less coordinated efforts to avoid stalemate or blockages. Furthermore, they contend that the EU’s ability to take a Comprehensive Approach also depends on the member states, but remain sceptical of their commitment to a whole-of-EU approach.²¹

6. A Comprehensive Approach to crisis management or a whole-of-EU approach to external action?

The first major difficulty for a Comprehensive Approach from the EU relates to the understanding of when and for what the Comprehensive Approach is needed. This has critical implications for the processes and mechanisms required to put it into practice. Although EU member states have agreed that “the need for a comprehensive approach is most acute in crisis and conflict situations and in fragile states”,²² there still is

¹⁸ Five Council working bodies were called upon to give their views and advice on the HR/EC joint Communication on the EU’s comprehensive approach: the Development Committee (CODEV), the Military Committee (EUMC), the Committee for Civilian Aspects of Crisis Management (CIVCOM), the Politico-Military Group (PMG), and the Committee on Humanitarian Aid and Food Aid (COHAF).

¹⁹ The EC Communication on the Agenda for Change in 2011 states the EU “should finalise and implemented the requested Action Plan on Security, Fragility and Development” (p.6). As of 2012, EU member states have played a preeminent role in putting earlier calls on an Action Plan back into the EU institutional agenda. Some produced non-papers outlining their views and priorities for the EU Comprehensive Approach.

²⁰ Hauck, V. and Sherriff, A., “[Important progress, but real EU comprehensiveness is still ahead of us](#)”, *ECDPM Talking Points blog*, 20-12-2013.

²¹ See also Sherriff and Hauck 2014.

²² Foreign Affairs Council Conclusions, 12.05.2014, paragraph 2.

disagreement within and between EU institutions and member states on what the problems are, and how to move towards a Comprehensive Approach. The diverse understanding of state fragility in all its varying degrees or of when a situation can be defined as a 'crisis' leaves wide room for interpretation.²³

The reference in the joint communication to conflict prevention can be read as a statement in favour of engagement 'upstream' in situations of conflict or crisis, and that there are calls for links between a range of relevant EU policies. However, the Communication is weak on how the EC and the EEAS intend to pursue a broader Comprehensive Approach beyond conflict and crisis.

The reference in the Council Conclusions to taking forward the commitments to Policy Coherence for Development (PCD)²⁴ point to a broader interpretation of the Comprehensive Approach. However, the Council has not clearly decided which of those two main interpretations should be the focus of the EU Comprehensive Approach:

A) *A Comprehensive Approach to Conflict and Crisis*

Arguments in favour of a narrower Comprehensive Approach focused on crisis management, are mainly based on political and capacity issues. It is argued that in the absence of a sense of urgency (e.g. crisis or conflict and a clear perception of threat to common EU interests) it is difficult for all relevant EU actors (institutions and member states) to agree on a joint strategy and, above all, commit to its rapid implementation. Even in crisis situations, as for instance in Syria, too many interests and a complex and fluid situation makes a shared understanding and policy approach difficult. In addition, a Comprehensive Approach requires significant amounts of human resources, time investment and expertise that the EU can hardly mobilise in every context. It entails a process of coordination and articulation that is even more complex and time consuming in the EU context, given its institutional complexity and diversity of actors, policies, instruments, priorities and interests. As a result of political and 'organisational' realism, and given the EU's capacity constraints, it is likely that the focus and efforts towards a Comprehensive Approach will be hijacked by crisis and conflict situations, because member states' attention and prioritisation tends to focus on such situations.

B) *A Comprehensive Approach to EU external action*

In other words, a '*Whole-of-EU approach*' with joined-up general *modus operandi* for EU institutions and member states that seeks to enhance the wide range of EU policies, instruments and actions for a more coherent and effective action upstream and beyond crises. This is especially important in fragile or transition contexts, where lack of coherence across inter-connected policy interventions – political, security, economic or social – can more easily undermine stability, reversing the transition process or, at best, lead to no results. Building up synergies across inter-connected policy areas can help create favourable conditions for transition and consolidate progress. That requires good knowledge and shared understanding of the interconnectedness between policy areas and local and external dynamics. For instance in Somalia or in South Sudan, progress in building up the security sector remains fragile as the highly complex political process is very volatile and influenced by multiple factors that shape the perception of political legitimacy of the government in Mogadishu or in Juba.

Each of these 'views' of the comprehensive approach has its merits and its limitations. There is a need to identify the objectives and challenges to a Comprehensive Approach in each case - including the eventual

²³ For instance, while DEVCO's list of crisis countries or situations (i.e. countries where the EU is applying flexible procedures for crisis countries) includes around fifty countries, only about a quarter are addressed in the Council as crisis.

²⁴ PCD is a process of identifying and building synergies between EU policies that ultimately contribute to long-term stability and development (not a submission of other policy areas to development). From the twelve initial policy areas identified, five have been defined as priority areas for PCD: Trade and Finance; Climate Change; Food Security; Migration; and Security.

limits to acting comprehensively - in order to avoid a paralysis of action when differences of views, interests or other factors prevent a shared vision and strategy. The **main challenges for a EU comprehensive approach** relate to the following sets of factors:

- *Political* - the Comprehensive Approach is a shared responsibility of EU institutions and member states in their respective capitals, in Brussels and in-country. Coordinating positions and especially the actions of such a variety of actors will be challenging in any case. Differences in political objectives and approaches means consensus is sometimes hard to get, or at least only allows for 'minimum common denominator' response that falls short of what is needed for a coherent and comprehensive EU approach.
- *Organisational* - the difficulties in articulating a variety of EU policies and instruments, with different objectives, timelines, rules and procedures are well known and remain a challenge, despite progress and continuing efforts to allow for flexibility in financial regulations and programming. Different institutions and actors are responsible for managing the wide range of EU policies and instruments, and they aren't necessarily obliged to engage with or consult each other, even when policies or actions in one dimension impact on another. Implementing change in institutional cultures to promote joint working at all levels is a significant challenge that will require clear commitment from the top hierarchies of EU institutions – something the Juncker Commission appears determined to take up – and in member states' administrations. It will also require clear guidance on how to balance collective and specific policy objectives and approaches.
- *Contextual* - each country situation requires a specific country based approach that is informed primarily by the local political economy, as well as by EU's interests and capacities, and the role of other external actors. There can be no 'one size fits all' type of Comprehensive Approach, but avoiding the easy fix of transposing models and effectively managing to translate contextual knowledge into policy planning and implementation remains a major challenge.²⁵

What is then feasible and desirable to bring together the EU's different actors, instruments and policy tools (diplomacy, security, development, trade and other relevant policies) – including those of the member states – in a coherent, flexible and mutually supportive manner? How to put into practice an articulated whole-of-EU strategy, particularly in fragile countries and regions marked by transition, instability and conflict? What degree of comprehensiveness can or should EU actors realistically aim toward?

7. Ways forward: considerations for an action plan on the EU Comprehensive Approach.

Acting on the basics

There is wide **consensus** among EU actors about some basic steps or requirements for a Comprehensive Approach. Firstly, there is a need to **understand the context** in which the EU is working in ('the what?'). Secondly, there is the need to define **what is it the EU wants to do** ('the vision'), **whether it can do and how** (the strategy). Thirdly, there is the need to **optimise the tools** or their use. These could be the points of departure for the Action Plan, identifying the enabling actions and the hurdles to:

- **Shared context analysis** across the EU institutions and member states, building on the knowledge from local, external, state and non-state source. Knowledge of the context is critical in all situations and should inform strategy, planning and programming in every policy area, whether humanitarian activities, governance support, CSDP operations, trade agreements or socio-economic development programmes. Countries, usually on different trajectories, require different mixes of security and

²⁵ See namely Furness 2014.

development policies specific to their needs. This is especially important in fragile contexts – not just in conflict or crisis situations – for the effectiveness of external support and to avoid doing harm (i.e. contributing to inadvertently exacerbating fragility and conflict causes) and to link political and operational issues in ways that are conflict sensitive and create or support positive change. There has been important progress to meet this basic step (see box 1 for a brief overview of progress in this area). Actions identified in the joint HR/EC Communication on the Comprehensive Approach are being taken further. Context analysis should be a systematic practice in the EU, but for analysis to be relevant it needs to inform policy and translate in strategies, programming and implementation. Understanding the constraints to making that happen would allow the EU to devise what kind of political and institutional or organisational support, incentives or mechanisms are required.

- **Shared vision of EU action as a necessary step towards a whole of EU strategy.** A shared vision needs to be informed by:
 1. Collective EU strategic priorities and objectives, as this is fundamental to ensure buy-in to in-turn improve the chances of sustained engagement;
 2. The circumstances on the ground; and
 3. The values and principles subscribed by member states in the Treaties.

The latter allows the EU to take a more balanced approach to often competing objectives, and as such confer added value to the role of the EU and strengthen its image as a more honest broker. Principled action should also facilitate the early involvement of humanitarian actors in the EU Comprehensive Approach and effective coordination, without necessarily requiring structural integration in the field or compromising on humanitarian principles.
- **Flexibility in EU instruments and programming procedures.** Several studies highlight that there is no lack of context knowledge in many EUDs. Balancing political and technocratic approaches is in fact happening in many contexts. However, translating that knowledge into effective action is often the greatest challenge. A frequently mentioned obstacle is the cumbersome and lengthy programming and financial procedures that don't favour timely programme adaptation. Yet, the Commission has in some cases adapted its strategy and programming to the changing situation, and has frequently combined various financial and non-financial instruments in order to respond rapidly in crisis situations. While greater flexibility had been built over the last years into the programming rules and the financial regulations, there is mixed evidence on the extent to which flexible procedures enhanced swift implementation. Furthermore, these do not seem to be used enough or as frequently as they could.²⁶ Whether this is because of lack of proper knowledge, guidance or incentives, there is a need to address the negative incentives to using the greater flexibility allowed in the 2014-2020 financial framework, ensure that EU actors know about them and how to maximise its benefits. EU oversight bodies and especially the European Parliament also have a role to play in incentivising the effective use of the allowed flexibility.
- **Making better use of the role of EU Delegations.** EUDs are in the frontline of European external action, enacting EU's values and interests and implementing the EU's foreign policy. They are the executive arms of the Comprehensive Approach in-country²⁷ (box 2). Combining diplomatic and operational work, EUDs are best placed to observe the overall coherence of the EU's political and operational strategy and adapt it to the evolving context, provided they are given adequate human and financial resources, the right expertise, and effective recognition and support by all EU actors.

²⁶ For an evidence-based analysis see the *Thematic Evaluation of European Commission Support to Conflict Prevention and Peace-building, Final Report*, by ADE-Particip for the European Commission, October 2011.

²⁷ For an overview on the role of EUDs see Helly, D., Herrero, A., Knoll, A., Galeazzi, G., Sherriff, A., [A closer look into EU's external action frontline: Framing the challenges ahead for EU Delegations](#), ECDPM Briefing Note 62, 2014. See also Helly, D. and Galeazzi, G., *Planting Seeds and Breaking Eggs: EU Delegations Dealing with Peace and Security – the Sahel Case and Beyond*, ECDPM Briefing Note 70, October 2014.

The more EU actors are involved in-country, the greater the potential of the EU to engage on multiple areas and apply a Comprehensive Approach. However, that further complicates (and can limit) the Head of Delegation (HoD) ability to effectively manage the coherence and complementarity of all EU actors and activities. This is especially challenging when different EU institutional actors have overlapping competences, different channels of reporting and there is no 'control and command' structure that clarifies who speaks for the EU and which competing objectives are to be prioritised. That also requires additional staff and competences EUDs are often not provided with or, at best, come late. The case of the EU Mission for Somalia is one illustrative example among others of all those challenges combined, and of the difficulties for EUDs to effectively be the 'One EU voice' in difficult contexts. Member states have their own political dialogue channels with local actors and international partners, as well as their bilateral strategies and programmes. Although political positions and activities are supposed to be coordinated within the EU, in practice few actors are willing to subordinate their own bilateral agendas in the name of 'policy coherence', and are reluctant to openly discuss them when their bilateral policies and activities are perceived to be under scrutiny or controversial.²⁸

Box 2: EU Delegations in the frontline of the EU comprehensive approach

- EUDs represent the EU diplomatically at country level, in the dialogue with the government and local actors, and are responsible for the implementation of EU common policies and actions. Technical and political coordination with member states in country conducted under the aegis of the Head of Delegation (HoD or EU Ambassador), which also informs EU engagement and coordination with international partners in country.
- EUDs produce analysis and information about the country/regional situation, keeping headquarters and member states informed. There is however a need to ensure this is indeed a collective exercise and that it is also much more of a two-way street, member states sharing also their information and analysis.
- In the definition and implementation of EU's multi-annual programming, EUDs are responsible for consultation with the local actors and to draft the first proposal that is put forward to the EU institutions, being involved in the process until the programming is finalised and the programmes are defined.
- EUDs also have a role on regional strategies and programmes. In practice, however, regional programmes are generally managed by one EUD. Knowledge or involvement of other EUDs in the region is in many cases weak, partly as a result of lack of human resources.
- The HoD is charged with steering the implementation of EU's external policy in the country. It is up to the EUDs to translate the available policy and guidance in relevant areas to fit the context, and have a key role in adapting the EU strategy as the situation evolves, provided they are given the power and the tools to adapt or change the course of action in the face of developments on the ground.
- The leadership of the HoD determines to a large extent the role of the EUD. Every Delegation staff is under his/her political direction, but whether there is a shared sense of purpose depends in large part on how the Delegation operates internally. Involving the whole of the Delegation in context analysis exercises and in joint reflections over the implications for the EU strategy in country is likely to facilitate synergies across policy areas and activities. HoD leadership and knowledge of EU's technical and political complexity determines also (along with collaborative attitude of the staff) his/her ability to circumnavigate the institutional differences and create a culture of joint work, regardless of the institutional affiliation of staff.

Address key underlying challenges

Whilst there is momentum to build on these critical points of consensus for the comprehensive approach, this requires addressing some fundamental political, capacity and operational issues:

²⁸ Faria, F. and Youngs, R., *European conflict resolution policies: truncated peace-building*, FRIDE Working Paper 97, March 2010. For more information and analysis on the challenges of PCD, see [ECDPM publications](#) on the subject.

A) Political and institutional leadership. EU experience shows that when there is convergence of collective interests among EU actors and strong political leadership by a few member states (often pushed or lead by an especially interested member state), or international security is perceived to be at risk, the EU is able to move closer towards a more coordinated political line and strategy (e.g. in the Balkans in the 90s, presently in Ukraine and in Mali, in Georgia or in the Democratic Republic of Congo at least at the height of the crisis). The challenge is often to sustain that momentum overtime, and beyond crisis or emergency situations, and move further into a comprehensive approach. As many EU diplomats acknowledge, efforts to work more comprehensively are a lesser priority when political attention dwindles (as strategic interests change or other priorities take the front stage) or when member states interests are too different to converge in a shared vision. The level of ambition for the comprehensive approach may therefore need to be adapted to the different degrees of EU actors' political and strategic priorities:

- **An institutional EU Comprehensive Approach:** where the EEAS and the EC (the DGs whose areas of work are relevant to external action) work in a more integrated manner to advance shared objectives. EU institutions function as the precursor to a broader EU comprehensive approach, but this is only a partial step towards an effective comprehensive approach. In contexts where member states have competing interests, or their approaches are at odds with the collective EU approach, the EU should take the lead.
- **A 'whole-of-EU' Comprehensive Approach:** where member states are more politically engaged and committed. This is especially important where CSDP missions (which are under the political control of member states) are deployed, and requires clarity also on the relationship between EUDs/HoD, CSDP missions and EU Special Representatives where existing, to avoid overlaps and confusion over who represents and voices critical EU policies and political positions.

B) A EU institutional culture. EU staff mobility and integration of member states seconded personnel should be further promoted, while making sure that critical knowledge and institutional memory does not get lost in the process. This needs to include an understanding of the interconnectedness of broader security and development issues, as well as a better knowledge of how to use the variety of EU policies and instruments. One could assume the EEAS, a melting pot of EU institutional cultures and expertise (member states' diplomats, Council Secretariat and European Commission staff), would facilitate linkages across EU institutions, policies and actors. But the lengthy process of clarifying roles and mandates as the EEAS was being set-up has led to institutional tension and turf power dynamics that seem to have offset the potential advantages, at least in its early years. It would be relevant to have a deeper analysis of why the EEAS did not deliver on its potential.

C) Adequate human resources both in numbers, capacity and expertise, especially at country level. That may include scaling up the mobility of staff (from EU member states and/or from Commission services and agencies) to allow for a more effective EU approach and activities to new areas of external action like migration, environment, energy, maritime security and others that are relevant. Human resource policy and management needs to include career incentives that promote joint work and effective results. This requires also a clearer definition of objectives and results to be attained within the Comprehensive Approach.

D) Long-term monitoring. Long-term impact monitoring and results evaluation mechanisms would allow a continuous review and monitoring of impact, progress and results as per the political objectives of EU strategies, and function as a sounding board to assess and review the EU strategy and approach. Good practices by the EU and other donors should inform an analysis and reflection of what works in which context and circumstances, and be fed into the planning system. But there is also need to have an honest and objective assessment of practices and impact in order to test and verify the causality chain of theories of change. This is not without challenges, especially in statebuilding and peacebuilding processes in fragile or conflict situations, where it may be difficult to quantify the long-term impact of processes and thus prove that it is indeed 'value for money'. That makes it also easier to dismiss failure on a number of factors,

conditions or actors' behaviour, but it should not prevent the EU from doing a honest assessment and reporting across the EU services and member states of what failed and why. In most policy areas and especially in CSDP missions, the pressure to prove cost-effectiveness and show positive impact or success is strong. As a result, a number of filters tend to water down or eliminate critical assessments in monitoring and evaluation reports or lessons exercises.

E) **Mechanisms for joint work.** In order to work as one at country level, there needs to be mechanisms for more effective joint work at the Brussels level and in EU capitals, addressing the 'silo type of approach' that exists in the Commission, in the EEAS, in the Council working groups and at the national level in member states politics and administrations. Efforts towards joint work between Commission services and with (and within) the EEAS have in many instances failed or had limited impact because of the lack of support at higher technical and political levels in the EU institutions, including in the Council working groups. In the Council, the issues discussed are often relevant to a number of working groups, but there are no institutionalised or informal practices established to ensure cross dialogue between these actors' views and priorities. The fact that few member states have comprehensive systems in place at national level makes their buy-in to a EU Comprehensive Approach more difficult or superficial at best, impacting on the EU's ability to address the policy and political disconnect in European external action.²⁹ In crisis situations, and especially when CSDP missions and operations are considered, it is important that these are planned in the context of wider EU objectives and activities, and not seen as a stand alone intervention, which they rarely are. This requires greater dialogue and coordination with other EU instruments early on, which is actually happening at technical level and where reflection is quite advanced.³⁰

8. Concluding remarks

Defining and applying the Comprehensive Approach will require political will and commitment from all quarters of the EU. Member states also have a key role to play through their bilateral policies, capacities for CSDP missions, political control over European foreign policy writ large and especially security and defence policy. Certain actions should be mandatory, like the sharing of relevant information and analysis between and within member states and EU institutions, joint analysis, fact-finding missions, strategy design and early involvement of relevant EU actors in aid programming and planning beyond those immediately concerned. This is among other factors, that requires both EU institutional actors and member states' administrations be given the right incentives and capacities to implement comprehensive approaches.

Having the right tools, processes and mechanisms for a comprehensive approach in place (in Brussels and at country level) does not guarantee, however, a single EU political line or approach in every fragile or conflict situation, nor is this necessarily always an advantage. It is indeed not at all desirable if a 'single EU line' means limiting the EU potential or its added-value as a perceived 'honest broker' in difficult contexts, where member states bilateral agenda and policies may be contested. The EU comprehensive approach should not become either some sort of "pensée unique" that prevents EU actors to try out different approaches. None of these two 'scenarios' should, however, curtail coordination within and across the institutions and with member states, which should be informed by honest analysis of the 'pros and cons' of standing by a single EU vision and strategy.

²⁹ On the politics and systems of EU member states comprehensive approaches at national level and what these might mean for the contributions that each can make towards more comprehensiveness in EU external action see Hauck, V. and Rocca, C., *Bridging the gaps between EU comprehensive approaches*, ECDPM, 2014 (forthcoming).

³⁰ See namely the EEAS (Crisis management and Planning Directorate - CMPD), *CSDP Transition strategies – recent lessons*, Brussels, 15.07.2014.

Having such mechanisms in place does not ensure effective and timely action; it could in fact delay it in case of significant differences. However, enshrining mechanisms and practices of information-sharing and joint analysis, and incentivising shared responsibility to devise common strategies and articulate policies and tools would nonetheless be a major step forward towards a more systematic and effective EU Comprehensive Approach to external action, in crisis as well as ‘upstream’ and beyond crisis situations. That will require a rationalisation of tools and a clarification of roles in the Commission and in the EEAS in order to address duplications that are the source of inefficiencies, tension, confusion and competition over roles and resources.

Lastly, **no Comprehensive Approach can be static**. Both the contexts that produce them and those they apply to aren’t either; they are changing realities with own political economy dynamics. EU actors should therefore see the Comprehensive Approach as an evolving and continuous quest, making sure that its tools and mechanisms allow for an adaptive process.

A Promising New Commission

The Juncker Commission has declared it will lead by example, defining political priorities and stressing the political nature of the Commission role and leadership. The new Commission structure has the potential to bring about positive change, breaking the silo approach. It promotes ‘team work’ across the Commission structures, under the steering and coordination of seven Vice-Presidents, in teams whose composition is defined as to the needs of the projects and may change as new ones develop. Commissioners may therefore need to work with different Vice-Presidents according to the relevance of their portfolios for each project, but responsibility for leading and coordinating each team is defined. At the same time, the new President of the Commission is careful in stressing there are no ‘super-commissioners’, and puts the accent on a “collaborative way of working” as a means to ensure that project priorities and aims are shared and supported at the highest political level across the Commission.

There is some risk involved in the merge of certain portfolios. For instance, Energy and Climate Action may see conflicting objectives that could result in paralysis or a watering down of EU goals. The positive outlook would be that the Commission pushes for more meaningful change, since no significant progress can be made in addressing climate change if the main energy actors are not on board. Somewhat more surprising was the branding of the Commissioner in charge of ECHO as ‘Commissioner for Humanitarian Aid and Crisis Management’, especially as the European Consensus on Humanitarian Aid states “EU humanitarian aid is not a crisis management tool”.³¹ While this labelling can be misleading and seen by some humanitarian actors as potentially problematic (particularly in conflict contexts where both EU humanitarian aid and military CSDP missions are at work), ECHO is unquestionably part of the EU prevention and crisis management system. It has an important role in the coordination of European emergency response to humanitarian crisis and disasters inside and outside Europe, notably through the Emergency Response Coordination Centre (ERCC). It has a role also in early warning through its experts’ network in the field, and increasingly in prevention, namely through resilience, LRRD and disaster risk management policies. Internal and external misperceptions and inter-institutional confusion may, however, need to be clarified in the new Commission, as the term of crisis management is understood and associated primarily with the EEAS crisis response system (see box 1) and civilian and military structures for CSDP missions.

How the ‘team work’ and such merging of portfolios will work in practice will be the subject of much attention and scrutiny, but there is a general feeling that changes are needed. Lessons from the experimental years following the creation of the EEAS appear to have been taken into account. The new

³¹ *The European Consensus on Humanitarian Aid*, Joint Statement by the Council and the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States meeting within the Council, the European Parliament and the European Commission, 30.1.2008, par. 15.

High Representative has been given the space and the political authority to make full use of her role as Vice-President of the Commission, and appears committed to do so. This should also facilitate delegating the representation of the EU to relevant external action Commissioners as per their portfolios, and increase their buy-in into a more coherent and cohesive EU foreign policy discourse and action.

Seizing the opportunity

The Action Plan would be a timely opportunity for the new Commission and the High Representative to jointly review institutional methods and operational mechanisms in the Commission, in the EEAS, and across the services, at all levels, for a more coherent and integrated approach to external action taking the Comprehensive Approach forward. Those plans could define how the political guidelines for the new Commission will translate in the inner workings of the Commission and the EEAS, at the various levels of the administration; and what changes in methods, processes or structures are required to best support the 'external action team' at the top political level. This will require the Commission and the EEAS to address namely the ineffective and counterproductive duplication of structures and overlapping of roles, and to define the incentives for joint work towards shared objectives.

In addition, because the Comprehensive Approach is a shared responsibility of the EU institutions and member states, the Action Plan should address as well what kind of supportive action will those changes require from the Council, in terms of its structures and decision-making processes, as well as from member states individually (e.g. developing national systems for a comprehensive approach). This will require an active participation of the member states in defining the Action Plan, including their own role and responsibility in the EU Comprehensive Approach. Member states own internal systems for comprehensiveness, as well as their willingness to integrate politically within the Union, determine their commitment and ability to contribute and implement the EU comprehensive approach.³²

Lessons and experience from the implementation of EU strategies (e.g. for the Horn of Africa, the Sahel, Somalia or South Sudan) and other Action Plans (e.g. on the Consensus on Humanitarian Aid³³) need to be taken into account in a future Action Plan on the Comprehensive Approach. While useful for a better understanding of overall EU action or awareness of EU policies that should facilitate overall EU coherence, these strategies and Action Plans have not been a 'game changer' in terms of 'breaking the silos' between EU activities and actors, nor influential in shaping Member States' policies or actions, nor in terms of their impact on the ground.

The Action Plan on the comprehensive approach should not to be a one-way obligation for the institutions only, from which EU member states can opt-out. It should not be seen either a 'one or nothing' option for EU external action. Rather than the illusive and futile pursuit of continuous EU coherence and alignment across actors including member-states at all times, the Action Plan should provide EU actors with an effective system to be able to "speak with one voice at critical moments".³⁴ It should also provide the EU with flexible mechanisms to coordinate action and adapt strategies and activities, without limiting the possibilities of taking alternative approaches to advance shared objectives and the collective interest of the EU. For sure not an easy task, but a natural follow-up to the political programme of the Juncker Commission.

³² Hauck and Rocca, 2014.

³³ See VOICE, *The European Consensus on Humanitarian Aid - an NGO perspective*, A VOICE study by DARA, May 2014; and EC, *Evaluation of the implementation of the European Consensus on Humanitarian Aid - Final Report*, Evaluation sector of ECHO, prepared by ADE in collaboration with the Humanitarian Futures Programme, King's College London, June 2014.

³⁴ Sherriff, A., V. Hauck, C. Rocca, *Glass half full: Study on EU lessons learnt in mediation and dialogue*, ECDPM study for the EEAS, 2013.

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