

THE EUROPEAN PEACEBUILDING LIAISON OFFICE – EPLO

Interview with Nicolas Beger

Can you explain what EPLO¹ is?

EPLO is a platform of European NGOs, networks of NGOs, and think tanks active in the field of peacebuilding who share an interest in promoting sustainable peacebuilding policies among decision-makers in the European Union (EU). EPLO is a formally structured NGO platform, with clear decision-making rules that are based on a strict added value principle (i.e. we only join forces where it is more useful to work together, e.g. the technicalities of certain EU debates, and leave to member organisations what they better implement themselves). More precisely this means that EPLO's members work on the implementation of measures that lead to sustainable peace, not only between and within states but particularly among citizens. EPLO reflects this joint work vis-à-vis the EU and its Member States. From various approaches and in all conflict zones of the world, EPLO's members implement, research, and evaluate peacebuilding measures and subsequently come together through EPLO to argue at a policy level for non-violent conflict transformation and resolution, insuring that their values, objectives, and their specific expertise are reflected in EU policies. EPLO, broadly speaking, wants the EU to recognise the crucial connection between peacebuilding and the eradication of poverty, global sustainable development, and the fundamental role NGOs can play in EU efforts for peacebuilding, conflict prevention, and crisis management.

Who are the members of EPLO?

EPLO's members include many large NGOs working in the field, and jointly our members are active in all conflict zones of the world. We currently have 20 member organisations, some of which are themselves larger networks that reach out to many locally based peace NGOs in Europe and our global network members branch out to a very large network of NGOs based in conflict zones. Our members are not only active in all conflict zones of the world, they also bring together a vast array of peacebuilding techniques, programmes, approaches, evaluation methods, expertise etc. that cover most of the existing tools and themes used by civil society to engage in peacebuilding. Our membership is growing at the moment, but currently EPLO brings together: the Berghof Research Centre for Constructive Conflict Management, the Crisis Management Initiative, the European Network for Civil Peace Services, the European Centre for Conflict Prevention, the Field Diplomacy Initiative, the German Platform for Peaceful Conflict Management, Groupe de Recherches et d'Information sur la Paix et la Sécurité (GRIP), the International Alert, the International Centre for Transitional Justice, the International Security Information Service, Interpeace, KATU (Finnish Civil Society Conflict Prevention Network), Nonviolent Peaceforce, Pax Christi International, the Life and Peace Institute, Peace Team Forum Sweden, the Quaker Council for European Affairs, Saferworld, Search for Common Ground, Swisspeace and World

Vision. Moreover, EPLO has close relationships with other NGO networks, particularly in the field of human rights and development. Wherever possible we work together to create synergies and join forces.

What is the role that NGOs can play and in which type of activities is EPLO involved concretely?

The roles NGOs can usefully play are varied and we maintain that civil society organisations are a crucial part of any successful efforts towards sustainable peace. In fact, at EU and mission levels, civil dialogue on peace and security ought to be increased. However, we recognise the limits and remaining open questions vis-à-vis this dialogue, and we insist on the added value principle here as well. EPLO - together with CMI and KATU - has been engaged in a thorough research project with the support of the Finnish Presidency on the role of civil society in EU civilian crisis management. This project is now being followed by another initiative with the German Presidency. With the results of these projects we hope to be able to better support our argument of the necessary link between civil society and EU conflict prevention and crisis management activities. Broadly speaking, the first project identified the added value of NGOs at different levels: the strategic level in Brussels; the field level, including the cooperation with local civil society; mission evaluation and the development of lessons learned; training; and finally recruitment. In addition to this, there is obviously also a link to the

Nicolas Beger: Director of the European Peacebuilding Liaison Office (EPLO), an EU platform for peacebuilding and conflict prevention NGOs. Before working for EPLO he was the coordinator of the EU Civil Society Contact Group, bringing together seven rights and value-based NGO sectors, and he has also worked for other European NGO networks in the past 10 years. He has previously been engaged as a trainer in gender and anti-racism and has held academic posts in New Zealand, Germany, and the Netherlands.

The opinions reflected in this interview are those of the author and do not echo policy decisions of all EPLO member organisations.

1. For further information on EPLO see www.eplo.org

peace movement and citizens' interests in Europe. We have jointly produced a detailed report and are following the substance of the argument with some field based case studies under the German Presidency.

EPLO's activities are in principle centred around a "hub function": creating a link among the peacebuilding NGO sector and between the sector and the EU. This results in a considerable range of activities that fall broadly into three equally important areas. First, EPLO engages in advocacy. It does so through working groups, coordinated by the Secretariat. Currently, our members have chosen to focus on the following topics: civilian capabilities; budgetary structure of the EU; development/conflict sensitivity; gender; and we are currently developing work on thematic themes such as justice, security, governance and economics. EPLO makes its policy decisions and brings together its policy and implementation expertise through working groups and taskforces. The aim is to get involved in a range of EU policies and programmes adding a conflict prevention dimension to conflict related and apparently conflict unrelated EU external policies and assistance. The second leg of EPLO's activities concerns information and services. This includes services for our Member Organisations and the public through diverse kinds of internal and external publications, linking member organisations, building trust within the sector and towards other NGO sectors, and advertising the principle of peacebuilding and conflict prevention as a successful strategy. In the same manner we also provide information and expertise to EU institutions through a wide range of activities. This might include, for example, quick responses to individual

requests from officials, a data base on organisational expertise (a project we are currently developing), or bringing experts from the field. The EPLO secretariat also organises conferences and seminars together with EU institutions, and in particular with EU Presidencies, and it is also at times engaged in delivering training on peacebuilding and conflict sensitivity. Both the advocacy and the information/service activities form a part of raising awareness about the contribution the EU should make to peacebuilding and the need to hold the EU accountable to its own political commitments of helping secure peace within and outside its borders. EPLO's third "working leg" is the implementation of civil dialogue. As I explained above, peacebuilding and conflict prevention NGOs can contribute essential elements to EU activities and they effectively deliver programmes with a degree of ownership and inclusion that state actors of their nature cannot deliver. EPLO acts as a linking point for the EU to those who can deliver, join efforts, or provide the necessary help and advice in this respect. This activity does not only include acting as a potential administrative hook for this dialogue, but also engaging in analysis, data collection, and most prominently trust building among the different decision-makers and NGO actors inside and outside the EU.

What do you mean by sustainable peace?

This should be an easy question to answer for EPLO, but it is unfortunately not all that simple. EPLO maintains that conflicts are, in principle, part and parcel of human relations and it is the violent expression of conflict that is problematic². If peace is sustainable, conflicts can be resolved in a non-violent

fashion, without violating the fundamental rights of groups of people in society, and the governance structures can deliver conflict resolution. To achieve sustainable peace one needs certain pre-conditions, but these pre-conditions often require peace as a pre-condition themselves. I am thinking here of essentials such as democratic governance, rule of law, equitable distribution of natural resources, democratic oversight of the security sector, efficient justice systems, protection of the environment, non-discrimination etc. For example, delivering aid for democratic elections or disarmament might be a step towards peace in some situations, but it cannot deliver sustainable peace by itself. Once one has arrived at this point, it becomes evident how complex sustainable peace and the efforts towards it are. Peacebuilding is intrinsically connected to a range of fields as far apart as human security, business, and environmental protection. At EPLO we aim to further the understanding of how these apparently unrelated elements relate to peacebuilding and how direct peacebuilding efforts can be improved. For example, with our Civilian Intervention for Sustainable Peace (CISP) working group, EPLO aims to increase the awareness, scope and effectiveness (both in terms of lives and financial cost) of civilian contributions to conflict prevention, crisis management and peacebuilding. CISP also tries to reduce the dependence on military forces for activities which are better carried out by civilians to assure sustainable forms of change. We propose, therefore, alternative solutions for strengthening EU capacity (human and financial) and particularly its institutional coherence. The latter seems like a technical point only relevant to Brussels, but it is indeed probably one of the most signifi-

2. Many EPLO member organisations would include structural and psychological forms of violence in this definition.

cant reasons why the EU cannot deliver effectively on its own goals. The trickle down effect of this incoherence can have disastrous impact on the ground since it hinders thorough conflict analysis for a country/region and a subsequently conflict sensitive delivery of all EU activities across the institutions, pillars, and programmes, particularly where they seem to be conflict unrelated (e.g. Economic Partnership Agreements).

What is EPLO's view on the link between poverty and conflict?

Again, this is a question with considerable scope. Poverty definitely belongs to the potential structural causes of conflict. Yet poverty alone is not necessarily a pre-condition or a cause of violent conflict and this distinction is important. One can safely say that poverty belongs to the many root causes of conflict and EPLO's values certainly include the eradication of poverty. Our work in this area is mainly focused on conflict sensitivity and the important link between conflict prevention/postconflict reconstruction and development. For example, our working group on Peacebuilding and Development (PBD) focuses on conflict sensitivity and aims at strengthening the EU's capacity to prevent violent conflict and build peace through all of its external assistance programmes and policies including trade. Our belief is that sustainable development is a critical and essential aspect of peacebuilding, and the reverse is equally true.

But there is no development unless you tackle the issue of economic resources and the access to them.

This statement is correct and it is a large and important work area to which EPLO contributes in some smaller aspects. Besides EPLO's strong emphasis on conflict sensitivity and conflict analysis for all EU engagement in conflict-prone zones, we also strongly believe the EU budget should be capable of fulfilling the EU's external relations commitments to peacebuilding. With our working group on Funding for Peace (FFP), we advocate for a role of the EU as a serious player in safeguarding human security and we engage in EU budget discussions in relation to peacebuilding activities of the EU with a focus on financial planning, EU budget capabilities, programme funding, access of civil society, and Financial Perspectives. Thanks to our specific capacity in this field, EPLO can participate in the details of technical, financial, and programming debates that individual member organisations would not be able to on their own. Personally I think this work is a particularly clear example of how EPLO creates added value for the interests of its members.

What is your engagement on gender issues and peacebuilding? Why is this so important?

Gender issues are addressed in EPLO's new working group on Gender, Peace, and Security (GPS) in which we will advocate for full implementation of the UN Security Council Resolution 1325 and the related EP Resolu-

tion. Over the past few years, it has become apparent that the importance of gender analysis for successful peacebuilding programmes as well as the importance of women in conflict resolution is continuously undervalued. For example, there is evidence that the lack of gender focus in certain EU DDR processes has contributed to significant failures on those programmes. Equally, there has been little to no progress in increasing the number of women involved in EU peacebuilding programmes, missions, or peace diplomacy. Generally speaking, many decision-makers nowadays recognise the huge atrocities committed against women during violent conflict and some – but not many – have realised the essential contribution women make to peacebuilding. However, women as participants in conflict have received almost no attention and a successful gender analysis has to look precisely at both men and women as actors and how both are affected differently by conflict but also how each of them affect conflict differently. A large number of conflict prevention NGOs within and outside EPLO place a lot of emphasis on gender in their work and the interest generated within the EU institutions, most notably the European Parliament, has increased significantly over recent years. EPLO aims to both mainstream gender aspects in its work as well as dedicate considerable specific resources to that topic. We want to fill the analytical gap about EU policies on gender and violent conflict and create an improved advocacy capacity.