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# Approaching the European Union's crisis response and international peacekeeping from below

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**Approaching the European Union's crisis response and international peacekeeping from below**

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The European Union (EU) is rapidly increasing its crisis response mechanisms in areas far away from its European heartland. Currently, EU activities in crisis response are taking place in areas from Afghanistan and Iraq to the sand dunes of the Sahel and Mali. In this article we critically explore the new and much more proactive role of the EU in what must be defined as international peacekeeping, arguing that the new role of the EU cannot only be studied from the perspective of mandate and doctrine development in Europe alone, but that we also must seek to understand how the new role of the EU is interpreted by the population that supposedly are the beneficiaries of EU polices and programming. In order to achieve this we utilise a new data set that we have compiled where we have a strong combination of qualitative and quantitative data about how specific target populations in core countries for EU crisis response (see Bøås, Bjørkheim and Kvamme 2018), namely Afghanistan, Iraq and Mali understand the role of the EU and its attempts at crisis response.

Most of the literature on the EU's crisis response examines the organisation itself, its approaches, capabilities and policy development (e.g. Hill 1993; Whitman and Wolff 2012; Rieker 2009; Larsen 2002; Norheim-Martinsen 2013; Richard and Van Hamme 2013; Peters 2016). This literature has undoubted helped to advance our understanding of the EU as a foreign policy actor, including the role it plays in international peace and development efforts. Nonetheless, we argue that in order to gain a more thorough understanding of how the EU's crisis response plays out on the ground this approach is not sufficient. Therefore, we argue that these insights should be complemented by a more critical bottom-up approach (see for example Mac Ginty and Richmond 2013; Bøås 2015a; Jennings and Bøås 2015) that combine insights from peace and conflict as well as the more traditional institutional approaches to the EU. Such an approach, we argue, helps students of international interventions to get closer to the people these interventions seek to assist and provides more insight into the conflicts these interventions seek to alleviate, and thereby also of the role that external crisis response plays.

Thus, to shed new light on EU's crisis response, we explore the gap between the implementation of the EU's crisis response and its local reception, seeking to understand how the EU as an actor in crisis response is perceived by supposed beneficiaries. Our argument is that the EU may have good intentions, even if there is also a matter of self-interest in curbing migration and fighting insurgents identified by the EU as Jihadi groups. However, these aspects of obvious self-interest apart, we argue that there are two key intentions of the EU that it continues to fail to deliver on: conflict sensitivity and local ownership. These are considered essential components of any effective crisis response, including by the EU itself. Their absence will typically lower local support, effectiveness and ultimately impact of international interventions (e.g. Osland 2014; Nathan 2007; Mac Ginty and Richmond 2013; Gordon 2014; Mobekk 2010; Jennings and Bøås 2015). Insufficient or lacking conflict sensitivity and local ownership have, certainly, implications for the gap between the EU's intentions and implementation (see Bøås, Drange and Cissé 2018). It is precisely in the gap between implementation and the reception and perceptions of supposed local beneficiaries that insufficient or lacking conflict sensitivity and local ownership materialise.

In this article, we provide new empirical evidence from three key countries in the EU's crisis response in its extended neighbourhood: Afghanistan, Iraq and Mali. The empirical data consists of large perceptions surveys of the EU's beneficiaries in these countries, coupled with key informant interviews from each case. Based on these data, we provide an updated assessment of the EU's crisis response. Through this assessment, we point to factors explaining the gap between EU implementation and the local reception and perception of EU programming, including key deficiencies in the EU's implementation and obstacles related to conflict sensitivity and local ownership. By way of this, we provide some initial answers to the question: how do local populations receive and perceive the EU's crisis response? These findings also enable us to bring forward some suggestions concerning what obstacles the EU faces in the implementation of its crisis response.

In order to achieve this we explore commonalities across these cases, and start unpacking what this tells us about the EU's approach to conflict sensitivity and local ownership. Within this analysis, we engage with the influential report of the Human Security Study Group, which proposes that the EU adopts 'a second-generation human security approach to conflicts', and leave the former paths of war on terror and the liberal peace (Kaldor et al. 2018). Are there signs that the EU is adopting such an approach?

The further parts of this article is structured as follows. First, we present the methods and data. Then, we review the literature on conflict sensitivity and local ownership. This leads

us to an examination of the local perception and reception of the EU's crisis response in Afghanistan, Iraq and Mali. Next we identify commonalities across case and discuss lessons learnt before we conclude.
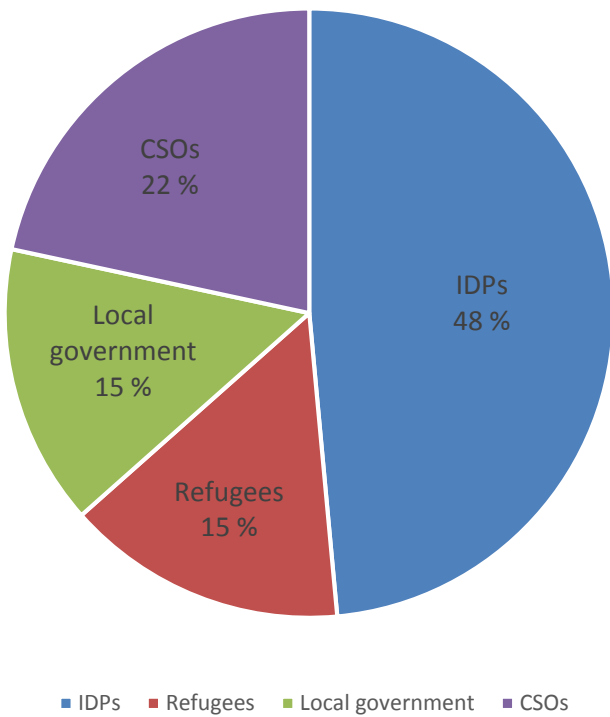
**Methods and data**

The empirical evidence consists of perception studies as well as key informant interviews (Echavez and Suroush 2017; Mohammed, AlaAldeen and Parani 2017; Cissé, Dakouo, Bøås and Kvamme 2017). The perception studies were all carried out in August 2017, and were carried out in similar ways with the same questionnaire. However, the questionnaire was adapted to local contexts, including translating it into local languages. The survey questionnaire interviews lasted approximately 20 minutes.
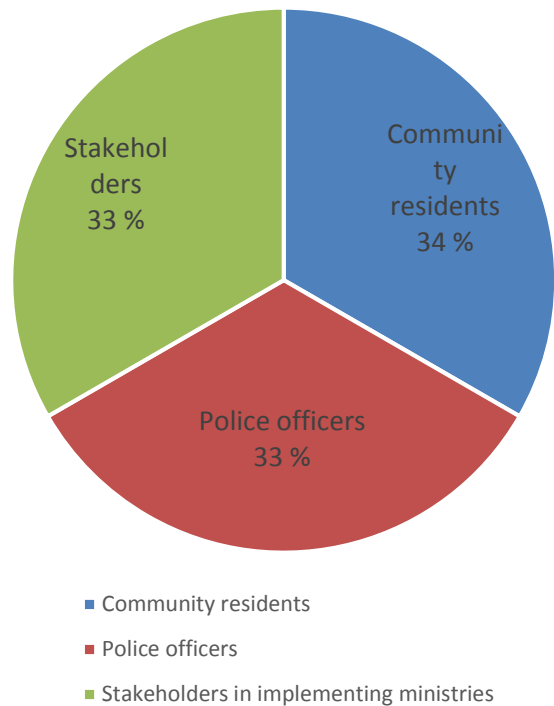
The key sampling requirement was to target beneficiaries of the EU's crisis response, either direct beneficiaries (e.g. trained personnel) or indirect ones (e.g. civilians in areas patrolled by trained police). This was done in order to reach respondents with a relatively high chance of having some knowledge and experience with the EU. We are aware that this creates a bias in our sample. However, without this bias our sample had a high chance of being meaningless for our purpose as we could only get reliable data on how the EU is received and perceived by the part of the population that actually knows about the EU. This is because knowledge or even awareness of the EU is not necessarily the case for most of the population in these countries. This means that we do not claim that our data have a high level of representability on the national level. Still, we argue that these data offer an intriguing picture of how a key external crisis response actor is viewed by supposed beneficiaries.

Our respondents, therefore, comprise different people across the cases. In Iraq, the majority of respondents were internally displaced people and refugees, as the EU's humanitarian aid in Kurdistan was the most visible part of the Union's crisis response (see Graph 1). In Afghanistan, one important part of EU programing in this regard is the support to police reform (EUPOL). The questionnaire was therefore handed to three categories of people; the community in which the EUPOL-trained police officers operated, direct beneficiaries (trained police officers), and stakeholders in ministries who served as partners in the EUPOL implementation (see Graph 2). The key research goal, then, was to examine various aspects of EUPOL's work. In Mali, the largest category was possible beneficiaries of the EU training missions such as police, gendarmerie and national guard, along with some local residents, civil society organisations, and local government staff (see Graph 3).

## Graph 1: Respondents in Iraq

IDPs
48 %

Refugees
15 %

Local government
15 %

CSOs
22 %

■ IDPs   ■ Refugees   ■ Local government   ■ CSOs

## Graph 2: Respondents in Afghansistan

Community residents
34 %

Police officers
33 %

Stakeholders
33 %

■ Community residents
■ Police officers
■ Stakeholders in implementing ministries

## Graph 3: Respondents in Mali

Local residents
20 %

CSOs
10 %

Local gov.
10 %

Police, gendarmerie, national guard
60 %

■ Police, gendarmerie, national guard   ■ Local gov   ■ CSOs   ■ Local residents

As much as we argue that these perceptions surveys are useful instruments to get a sense of how locals receive and perceive the EU's crisis response, we do not claim national representability. They are limited to certain areas of the countries, and therefore provide only a snapshot of one area in which the EU is engaged. In Afghanistan, 300 questionnaires were collected in Kabul, where EUPOL is engaged and where the security situation allowed for field work. In Iraq, 295 questionnaires were collected in four governorates where the EU is engaged. In Mali, 105 questionnaires were administered, though exclusively in Bamako due to security restrictions. Third, these are important data points by themselves, but are continuously considered together with key informant interviews.

Key informant interviews were conducted with a variety of stakeholders across the three cases. These have, in all cases, included members of the EU delegations, European training personnel, local and national government representatives, civil society organisations and academics. These interviews were semi-structured, which allowed researchers to probe into the interviewees' expertise and simultaneously allowed for consistency.

**Conflict sensitivity and local ownership**

Conflict sensitivity is, in the literature, often lauded as key to success and an essential component of any crisis response. However, while 'recognized as an important priority from systemic and organizational perspectives, it nonetheless remains conceptually elusive' (Handschin 2016: 4). A generic definition has been attempt, however, in that 'conflict sensitivity is the ability of an organisation to understand the context in which it operates, to understand the interaction between its intervention and the context; and to act upon the understanding of this interaction, in order to minimise negative impacts and maximise positive impacts'. (APFO et a.l 2004). The real challenge of conflict sensitivity, however, is to transform generic claims of being conflict sensitive into concrete conflict sensitive analyses and programming.

Conflict sensitivity can be explored and defined in various ways, depending on the scope and level of analysis. Haider (2014) highlight three approaches which have been central in the literature on conflict sensitivity. The first, *Do No Harm*, arises from Mary Anderson's work (e.g. Anderson and Olson 2003), and has been transformed into a project level tool (see CDA 2004; Wallace 2014). The second, the peace and conflict impact assessment (PCIA) tool, first formulated by Bush (1998; 2009), is by Haider (2014: 14) said to include more of a contextual analysis to understand potential impact. The third, is the Aid for Peace approach, which starts

with examining local needs, and which examines the intervention's impact on the local context and vice versa (Haider 2014: 16).

Barbolet et al. (2005: 2) seek to move beyond tools and 'undue emphasis on complex tools, tables and methodologies'. They emphasise the need to move beyond individual organisations' use of assessments of their own impact and their own projects: conflict sensitivity cannot be an independent part of an organisation's actions, it must be an integral part of its planning. As Lange (2004: 5) argues, conflict sensitivity must be tightly linked with the organisation's mandate. Barbolet et al. (2005: 11), moreover, stress that coordination plays an integral part of conflict sensitivity. To have an overall positive impact, co-ordination can help the conflict sensitive intervention of one actor not to be frustrated by lacking conflict sensitivity of other actors. Even in the design of programs, greater coordination is needed to see how actors can complement and not contradict each other's actions. (Barbolet et al. 2005: 11)

Coordination between actors in fragile states most often mean the co-ordination of external (and Western) actors' interventions. Conflict sensitivity in a wider definition not only asks what actors and dynamics are taken into account, but who designs these interventions in the first place. For example, fragile states with widespread corruption and low legitimacy are often circumvented when interventions are planned (Barbolet et al. 2005; Bøås 2017). Indeed, co-operating or co-ordinating with officials and politicians in such states carry with 'inherent risks and moral challenges' (Barbolet et al. 2005; Bøås 2017). Here, interveners face the continuous challenge of how, to what extent and if cooperate at all.

The much larger question about conflict sensitivity is whose problems are to-be dealt with. Interveners will always have some kind of agenda that—to a smaller or greater extent—contradicts or clashes with those of local populations and local authorities. This leads us into another key concept which—like conflict sensitivity—has become a popular concept in any external intervention, be it of development, humanitarian aid, peace- and state-building; local ownership. Local ownership has been named a precondition for the effectiveness of any intervention (Osland 2014; Nathan 2007), but international institutions struggle to walk the talk (Mac Ginty and Richmond 2013; Bøås and Stig 2010). Local ownership and conflict sensitivity are interlinked concepts, and are often analysed together. While conflict sensitivity primarily means to tailor-make interventions to a specific setting, local ownership concerns the extent to which local forces own and work to implement any program. In other words, while local ownership is here thought to create the framework within which actions and programs are implemented, conflict sensitivity concerns more the content of those actions and programs.

Local ownership, then, concerns the extent to which actions and programs are anchored in and driven by local forces. The opposite of local ownership, then, is essentially the imposition of actions and programs by external actor. In practice, local ownership is typically lacking (Mac Ginty and Richmond 2013; Bøås and Stig 2010; Osland 2014), where external actors impose 'their models and programmes on local actors' (Nathan 2007: 7). The consequences of lacking local ownership include lacking political support and willingness to drive through these changes, a lack of actors and agents to implement any program, and very likely ill-adapted programs which are not intended to solve underlying issues but address one's own agenda. Many argue that the US' intervention in Afghanistan was not to solve Afghan problems, but to pursue its own agenda and based on its own concepts and standards, many of which were foreign to the Afghan population. A staunch critic argues the US' basic assumptions about Afghanistan were wrong: it 'did not pose an existential threat to international security; the problem was not that it was a "failed state." The truth is that the West always lacked the knowledge, power, or legitimacy to fundamentally transform Afghanistan' (see Rory Stewart in Wittmeyer 2013).

*Local ownership and security sector reform in particular*
Local ownership is 'widely regarded as the bedrock and main precondition for successful security sector reform' (Gordon 2014: 127). Should security sector reform processes not be owned, one risks security sector institutions that are not responsive to local needs, which again limits public trust and confidence. Hence institutions and outputs from security sector reform processes may be rejected locally (Smith-Höhn 2010). Potentially, it can become a vicious circle where lack of local ownership leads to locals' 'resentment, resistance and inertia' (Nathan 2007: 3), which again makes external actors more reluctant to deal with local actors (Gordon 2014: 128).

Even when making efforts to provide for local ownership in security sector reform, these most commonly tend to be limited to a few 'like-minded, state-level members of the security and political elite who accept the decisions reached previously by external actors' (Gordon 2014: 129). Theoretically, most would agree that security sector reform should be 'designed, managed and implemented by local actors' together with the broader public (Nathan 2007: 4). In practice, however, governments and security sector leadership are defined as owners, and the extent of ownership is limited to occasional consultations (Mobekk 2010: 231). Hence, as a large scholarly community argues, the gap between practice and theory remains vast (Mobekk 2010; Gordon 2014; Sedra 2010).

As with conflict sensitivity, questions of who the locals are remain important: while the political and security elite may be the most approachable and those with whom external actors may have the most in common with, there is a variety of reasons for which limiting local ownership to elites is problematic. Crucially, if security sector reform is not owned by locals it is likely to have little resonance with people on the ground as security sector reform may seem 'imposed by external actors or driven by the self-interest of elite groups' (Gordon 2014; see also de Coning 2013). Relatedly, not including locals in the entire security sector reform process may not end up solving locals' problems. While there may be experts on security sector reform with external actors or within national governments, this expertise will not provide for sustainable impact if those who have experienced the insecurity and faced the problems are not included (Gordon 2014: 129). As supporting the political elite may contribute to the continuation of the current regime, a bottom-up and more people-centred security sector reform approach may 'help to address concentrations of power which feed corruption, organized crime and insecurity' (Gordon 2014: 142).

Essentially, these issues concern several larger questions about security sector reform: the extent to which security sector reform seeks to build relationships between people and the state, or to build state institutions (Gordon 2014: 131); the need for short-term vs long-term gains; and the extent to which external agendas or local ones drive the security sector reform process. On the latter, the war on terrorism which drove and still drive efforts in Afghanistan, Iraq and Mali as well as other conflict zones led to a focus on capacity-building in post-conflict states to face new armed conflicts (Duffield 2007; Patrick 2011; Gordon 2014). Hence, there is less focus on the civilian aspects of policing and more on the counterinsurgency capacities of the same personnel, as has been the case in Afghanistan (Peters et al. 2017). While the US strengthened Iraqi security institutions, these were alien to locals, and received little state support (Jackson 2010, see Gordon 2014: 132).

There are several reasons for which security sector reform continues to lack local ownership. One is that, although broad-based local consultations are desired, it is 'easier to deal with a limited demographic, particularly one that is more familiar and conveniently located' (Gordon 2014: 141). Moreover, the reliance on (often external) security sector reform professionals limits this, as these are viewed as the ones with the required familiarity with security sector reform (Gordon 2014: 129). On an overarching level, however, security sector reform continues to be designed and driven by external actors, often with other agendas. Further reasons are that wary local elites sometimes lack interest in (and remain resistant to) involve the citizenry in questions of security sector reform (Gordon 2014: 141). Indeed, external and

local interests may often not coincide (Kunz and Valasek 2012; Luckham and Kirk 2013; Gordon 2014: 142). Lastly, state-level actors may also support security sector reform to more effectively undermine political opponents (Donais 2009: 120-121; Gordon 2014: 130).

**The EU and conflict sensitivity**

The EU's efforts and capabilities to be conflict sensitive must be examined at various levels, including institutional capabilities. The general impression of the humanitarian aid sector of the EU crisis response, for example, is that they are fully aware of the need for focus on conflict sensitivity, but that 'the required structures and guidelines are not yet fully developed' (Bátora et al. 2016b). Moreover, 'even though there are well developed procedures for lessons learnt and internal and external evaluations of the EU activities in both institutions, there is little evidence of the extent to which these lessons in general, and those relating to local ownership and conflict sensitivity in particular, are actually fed back into the planning phase of new missions or activities' (Bátora et al. 2016b: 31).

While important to note, it is not only institutional capabilities that matter, but institutional interests. Indeed, the EU is often acting on self-interest (Bøås, Drange and Cissé 2018; Richmond, Pogodda and Mac Ginty 2016), where those are most commonly expressed through member states' diverse interests. Here, the actorness debate provides much insight into the EU's struggles with speaking with one voice (Peters 2016; Peters et al. 2017). Moreover, Richmond, Pogodda and Mac Ginty (2016) suggest—in the EU's extended neighbourhood in particular—the EU is more guided by European interests rather than European norms and rights compared to spheres closer to 'home'. In some ways, the more it is interests that guide any intervention, the less likely it is that—or difficult it will for—actors to engage based on conflict sensitivity. This is very much the case of Mali where it is impossible to understand the role of the EU without taking into consideration the role and interests of France.

As much as we see land-rights conflicts and their appropriation by violent entrepreneurs as a major driver of violence, we take issue with how this is framed in the anti-terror framework that has become the hallmark of international operations in Mali (Bøås 2018; Bøås 2015b). After the failed attempted in early January 2013 by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the African Union (AU) to respond to the Malian crisis, France launched a military operation, Operation Serval, based on a request from the transitional authorities in Bamako. This was followed by the AU operation, the African-led International Support Mission to Mali (AFISMA). Operation Serval succeeded in pushing the Jihadi insurgencies out of main northern cities like Gao, Kidal and Timbuktu. However, reluctant to take formal 'ownership'

of the international engagement in Mali, but also concerned that AFISMA would not be able to maintain Serval's military gains, France insisted on a stronger multilateral arrangement (see Théroux-Benoni 2014). France wanted AFISMA to be transposed into a UN force, like MINUSMA. That would also enable France to wield considerable influence over MINUSMA, whereas the costs and possible flaws could be more widely distributed. All this was possible because France holds a permanent seat on the UN Security Council, from where it was responsible for drafting resolutions on MINUSMA (see Tardy 2016); the situation did not change when Serval was replaced by Operation Barkhane in July 2014. This expanded the scope of the French mission to include other former French colonies in the region – Burkina Faso, Chad, Mauritania and Niger. Thus, even if Barkhane represents a wider geographical focus, it also reinforced the anti-terror approach to the Malian crisis, an approach that has been strongly promoted by French security and foreign politics (see Marchal 2013). We are not arguing against the need for a military approach to insurgencies such as Belmokhtar's *al-Mourabitoun:* but the fact that the Malian crisis has been framed within such a narrow focus has come to inform how the Malian state, opposition groups, contentious political actors on the ground, and other international actors approach the crisis and the issues at stake. This is particularly pertinent in the case of the government in Bamako, as having the crisis defined as caused by foreign terrorist insurgencies provides a convenient excuse for not dealing with the underlying internal causes of conflict and drivers of violence (see Ba and Bøås 2017).

**The EU from below: local reception and perception**

The EU faces various challenges in the implementation of its crisis response. These challenges have repercussions for the local reception and perception of it. While there are commonalities, these play out differently in all cases. In this section we present a summary of our findings, where we for each case focused on the sectors in which the EU was most visible and had the largest presence. In the case of Afghanistan, this is the EU's police mission (EUPOL), which was meant to 'serve as a potent symbol for the EU's stated ambition to become a global security provider' (Fescharek 2015: 49). In Iraq, this is primarily its humanitarian aid efforts in Kurdistan, as well as its involvement in the justice sector reform through EUJUST-LEX (Christova 2013; Steinberg 2009). In Mali, security sector reform is key, primarily its training mission of the army (EU Training Mission to Mali) and the police (EU Capacity Building Mission in Mali). However, to illustrate the EU's lack of conflict sensitivity and local ownership, we also examine its border management efforts.

*Lack of awareness…*

In general, this perception study suggests that awareness of the EU's presence is limited, something that is particularly noteworthy as respondents were targeted for being beneficiaries (direct or indirect) of EU support. In Iraq, a key explanation is that rather than the EU, respondents recognise the organisations the EU funds to implement their project (Mohammed 2018: 10). While it is contrary to the EU's intentions that few people know what it does, it is more troubling that few centrally placed people know what the EU is doing (Mohammed 2018: 10). This suggests limited local ownership of the programs. Indeed, as the EU mostly pays international NGOs—rather than local ones—to implement projects, the amount of local support decreases. Moreover, the efficiency and impact of the EU's crisis response will struggle. Lack of awareness of the EU and what it does is, in other words, an obstacle to providing more efficient crisis response itself. That the EU's communication capacities in Iraq are small, adds to this problem (Mohammed 2018).

Also in Mali are few respondents aware about what the EU is doing. While 83 per cent mentioned—without a prompt—the EU as one of the international actors involved in Mali, few respondents knew enough about the EU's operations to say whether or not they were satisfied with the assistance. This suggests that even respondents who have regular contact with EU programming have some difficulties understanding what this is all about (Cissé et al. 2017: 6). It should be worrying that 50 per cent of respondents have so little knowledge about what the EU is doing and contributing within crucial sectors of their society that they—on the question of satisfaction with the EU's response—cannot come up with an answer (Cissé et al. 2017: 6). Broken up by sectors, 47 per cent do not know of the EU' in the security sector, and in the rule of law sector the corresponding figure is 45 per cent (Cissé et al. 2017: 5). While the support to security sector reform in Mali is quite visible, very few people seem to believe that the EU reaches out to the most vulnerable groups, such as minorities, refugees and IDPs (see Figure 4). This is not necessarily correct if we look at the actual figures of EU assistance to Mali after 2012, but it gives an impression of what local people think, and it underlines the EU's challenges in communicating what it is doing, and who it is helping.

As we will come back to, these findings point to some much-needed rethinking about the current EU approach to leave a 'light footprint in Mali and build local ownership'. While it may, as people do not know much about its activities, leave a light footprint, it has certainly not managed to build local ownership. Contrary to its own intentions and claims, a deeper engagement with Malian counterparts and the population at large is missing. Moreover, the EU has been struggling with even communicating its activities to local beneficiaries. Clearer

communication of its goals may be important in Mali both to distinguish its actions from those of its former colonial power France (Cissé et al. 2017: 4), and in Iraq and Afghanistan to distinguish it from the US' much more militaristic approach.

Also in Afghanistan does the EU lack visibility—even among indirect and to some extent direct beneficiaries. In areas in which EUPOL trained police officers work, few know about EUPOL at all. While only about 48 per cent of residents in these areas knew about it, the numbers are—understandably—higher for police officers involved with or benefitting from EUPOL (96 per cent) and stakeholders from implementing ministries (85 per cent) (Echavez and Suroush 2017: 9). Moreover, that less than half (41 per cent) of the police officers involved with or benefitting from EUPOL reported 'high' awareness of the mission (Echavez and Suroush 2017: 9).
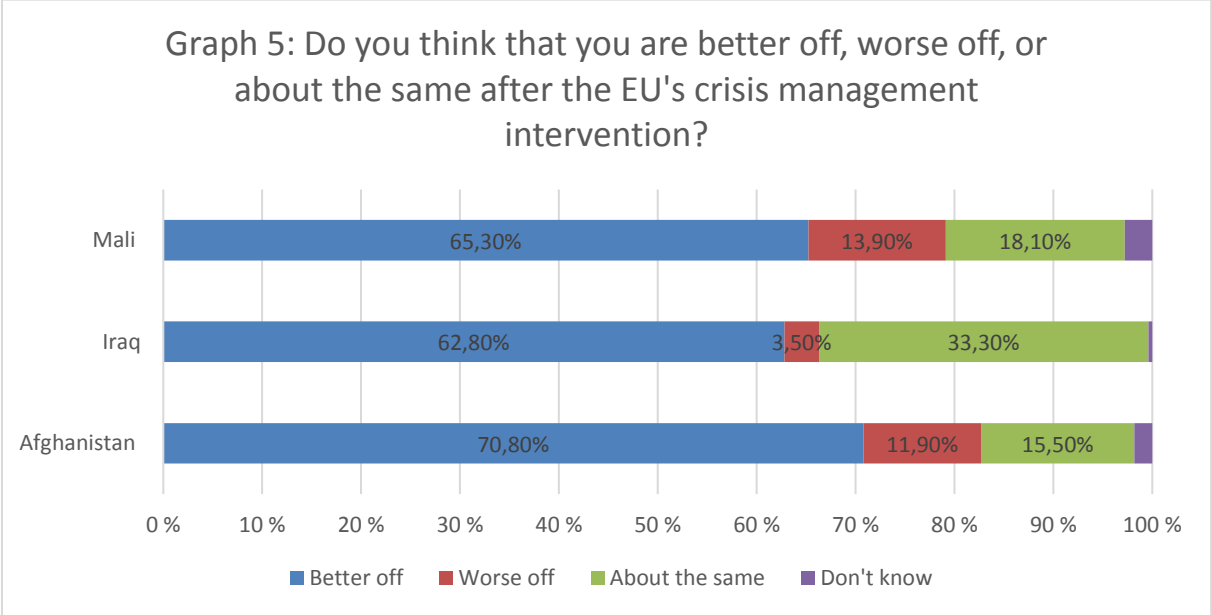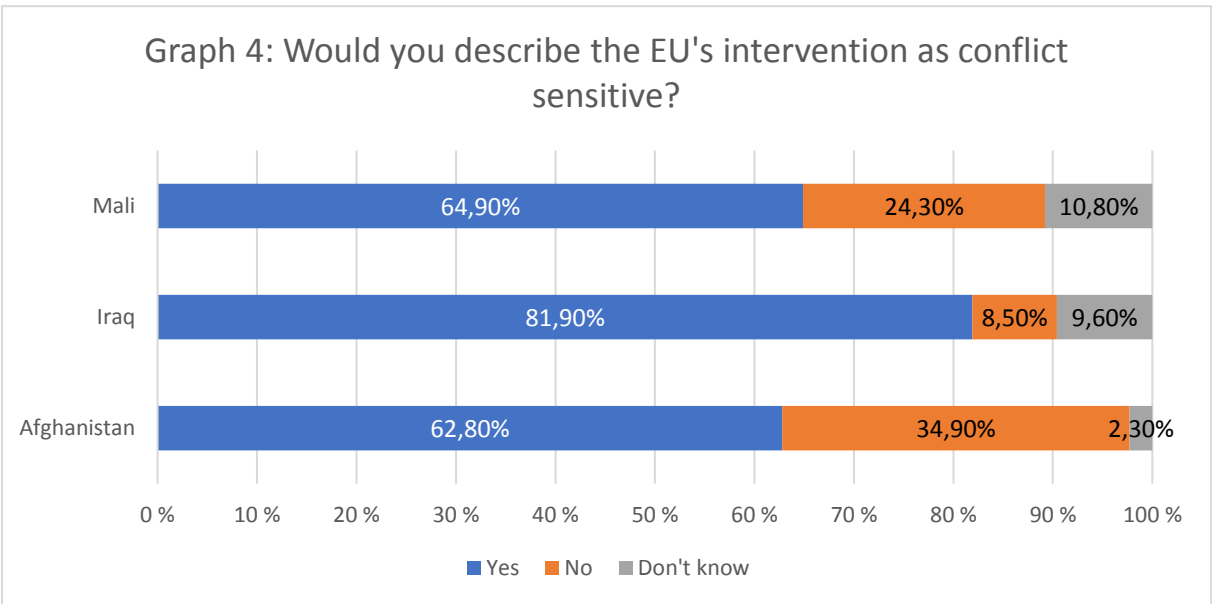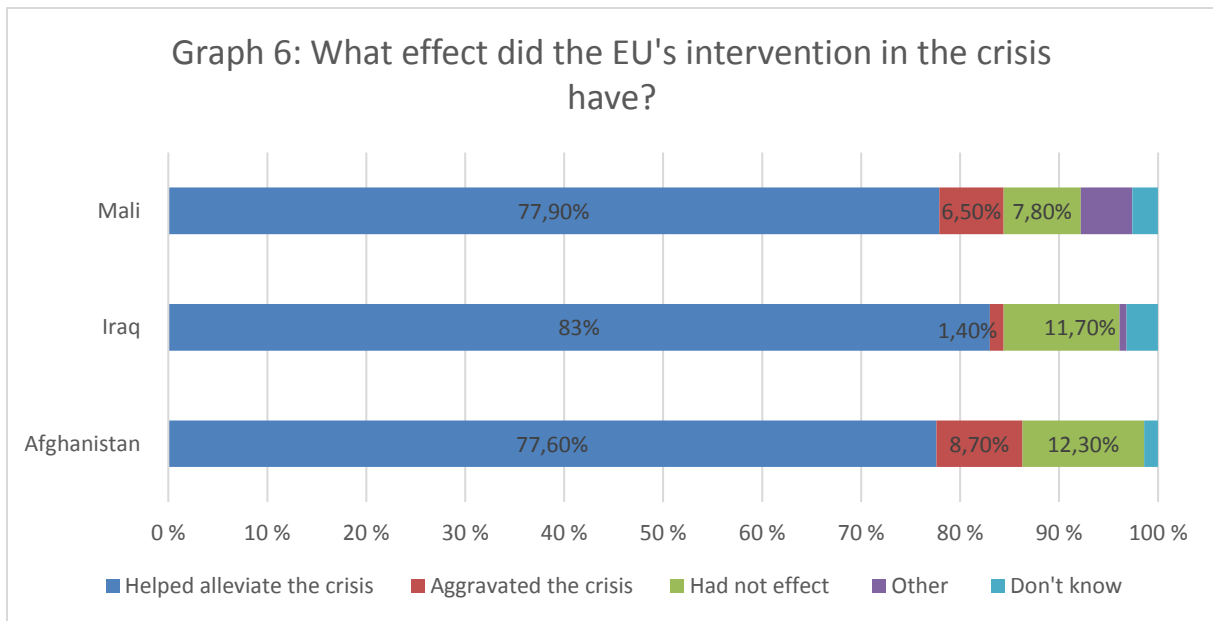
*… Yet positive about impact*

The results reveal that, despite limited awareness of them, most respondents find that the EU's responses in Afghanistan, Iraq and Mali help alleviate the crisis and that its response was conflict sensitive. Indeed, over half of respondents in Afghanistan and Mali and over 80 per cent in Iraq found the response to be conflict sensitive (see Graph 4). Moreover, in all three countries, around three quarters say there are better off after the EU's interventions (see Graph 5), and, importantly, around 80 per cent said the EU helped alleviate the crisis (see Graph 6). While the former question concerns the impact on an individual level (better or worse off), the latter asks about the impact of the EU on the crisis as a whole (alleviated or aggravated the crisis).

To explain this lack of awareness yet positive perception of the EU's response, it is important firstly to note that only respondents aware of the EU or EU-funded agencies' responses were asked about the impact of the responses. Moreover, as we believe most answered based on their own experiences, it is easy to understand that many thought the EU had made a positive impact. Indeed, as we targeted direct or indirect beneficiaries, it is understandable that they were reached in one way or another. As Graph 6 shows, while respondents were more positive about the EU's impact on the crisis, almost as many felt they themselves were better off than before the crisis (Graph 5).

Respondents are most positive in Iraq, both about impact (83 per cent) and conflict sensitivity (82 per cent), likely linked to the concrete efforts of the EU in providing humanitarian aid to displaced people and refugees in Kurdistan, who together comprised 63 per cent of all respondents there. In Afghanistan, 81 per cent report that they were better off due to

EUPOL (Echavez and Suroush 2017: 9). While this number is high, it must also be noted that out of 300 respondents, this excludes the 131 respondents who—despite being targeted for being indirect or direct beneficiaries—did not have some knowledge of EUPOL at all. In Mali we find similar dynamics. However, it is noteworthy that only populations in the capital Bamako in the South were sampled, which is significantly calmer than Central and Northern regions of Mali. Hence, the number of respondents who meant the EU helped alleviate the crisis may be a result of the general appreciation for the efforts of the EU who, together with other large international actors, at least helped stabilise Bamako and the capital area after the tumultuous years of 2012-2013.



Graph 4: Would you describe the EU's intervention as conflict sensitive?

| | Yes | No | Don't know |
|---|---|---|---|
| Mali | 64,90% | 24,30% | 10,80% |
| Iraq | 81,90% | 8,50% | 9,60% |
| Afghanistan | 62,80% | 34,90% | 2,30% |

Graph 5: Do you think that you are better off, worse off, or about the same after the EU's crisis management intervention?

| | Better off | Worse off | About the same | Don't know |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Mali | 65,30% | 13,90% | 18,10% | |
| Iraq | 62,80% | 3,50% | 33,30% | |
| Afghanistan | 70,80% | 11,90% | 15,50% | |

Graph 6: What effect did the EU's intervention in the crisis have?

*Limited conflict sensitivity and lacking local ownership*

While respondents are largely positive about the EU's impact, informants—including from civil society, local governments and academia—generally point to key deficiencies in the EU's response. In Iraq, several suggest the EU's response suffers from lacking conflict sensitivity. Some suggest the EU considers Iraq as one unit, and that the EU's 'one Iraq policy' hinders a more effective adaptation to specific areas (Mohammed 2018: 16). It is, however, important to recognise the extent to which this—by the EU—is considered necessary to have strong relations and influence in Bagdad and also have a united front with the US on this sensitive issue.

Indeed, the EU's approach to Iraq's security and justice sector reform seems to work well on an individual level, but has not managed to make a large and lasting impact. Through EUJUST-LEX, for example, it has attempted to target senior criminal justice officials. However, trainings have been short, and they face great challenges in convincing colleagues about the solutions proposed through these training (Christova 2013: 434). Again, the extent to which the EU's programs are tailor-made to specific settings, and the extent to which the EU has carefully considered the ways in which individual trainings can have large-scale systemic effects, seem limited. Moreover, coordination between external actors seem to lead to duplications or—even worse—counter-effects (Christova 2013: 434). Specifically, coordination with the U.S.—which prefers to involve the security and justice sector to provide for higher capacities to conduct counterinsurgencies—is critical (Steinberg 2009: 132).

One must, at the same time, recognise that the potential tangible effects of the EU's interventions are supposed to be long-term. This makes quick progress difficult to notice on a

systemic level. However, this also makes the project more vulnerable to external influences. Given the small size of the EU's engagement, it is unlikely to have a great impact on the overall determining factor of its success: if the Iraqi state as a whole will consolidate its democracy, or if it will fall back into authoritarianism (Stenberg 2009: 133).

The vulnerability to factors beyond the EU's reach may also significantly reduce its impact in Afghanistan. In Afghanistan the EU stresses its civilian approach to policing, which is often contrasted with the more militaristic approach of the US. Some suggest the US' approach, with short-term trainings aimed at supporting its counterinsurgency efforts, undermined the EU's (Theros 2010). More within the reach of the EU, however, was a key factor for ensuring long-term impact of any intervention; local ownership. While the EU, along with other Western actors, has intended and sought local ownership, it is really external actors who have driven security sector reform processes (Baranyi and Salahub 2011: 50). Indeed, EUPOL was implemented with little local ownership, and also with limited support even from the Afghan police officials themselves (Suroush 2018: 18ff). Afghan officials were involved only to a limited extent with design and implementation, and were often not aware of EUPOL activities (Suroush 2018: 19). While there were significant efforts to include national stakeholders, confidentiality of for example documents prevented further cooperation and joint benchmarking (Suroush 2018: 19). A Ministry of Interior official stated 'it was not clear to us that how much budget they had and how they were spending their budget'.[1] In general, police officials were unhappy with EUPOL's 'long and complicated procedures' of decision-making, including 'too much reliance' on individual member states.[2] Moreover, the EU was criticised for not having built any relationship with Afghan civil society organisations.[3]

In Mali, we argue the EU's border management efforts – also part of its crisis response but separate from its concrete security sector reform efforts – illustrate the EU's lack of both conflict sensitivity and local ownership. Concerning the latter, the implementers of the EU's projects are predominantly international actors. The lack of inclusion of important local actors is also manifested in lacking conflict sensitivity. The programs seem, based on their design, more fit to tackle the EU's own interests that those of local Malians. Indeed, its border management policy seems counterproductive: it hinders regional mobility – with negative impact on development and trade – while major traffickers (drug traffickers, gold traffickers)

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[1] Interview with a then Deputy Minister for MOI, 20 December 2017, Kabul.
[2] Interview with a high-ranking police official, MOI, 13 December 2017.
[3] Interview with the head of a leading civil society organisation, 18 November 2017.

can continue their business undisturbed. This is because they tend to operate in other areas, they can bribe border officers, and they can pass at other points of Mali's vast border.

Rather, the EU's border management efforts contribute to the difficulties communities that live at the border already face: that they cut across local communities and ethnic and groups, and hence complicates traditional cross-border activities. Moreover, such border controls go against Economic Community of West African States' (ECOWAS) convention which provides for free movement and trade within its territories.

This example of the EU's attempts to move beyond Bamako underlines how interventions based primarily on own interests necessarily lack local ownership and is at a very high risk of producing program designs insensitive to the conflict. Its border management efforts are strongly linked with the global migration crisis that manifested itself in 2014/2015 and which has spurred a renewed emphasis on Europe's near abroad and particularly towards North Africa and the Sahel. In short, Europe wants fewer northbound migrants and refugees and a reduction in what Europe see as a terrorist threat. This, however, may not necessarily be the main priority of the people that live here. Their concern is more immediately tied to living conditions that have come under immense pressure, whereas external interventions increasingly have taken a narrow security approach (Bøås 2018). This narrow security approach is, beyond the training of the army (EUTM) and the police (EUCAP) in Mali, also manifested in the regional organisation G5 Sahel (Bøås 2018).

This does not mean the EU seeks not to design conflict sensitive responses implemented with local ownership. Rather, it suggests that the EU, in its struggle to achieve numerous things at the same time and with limited consultation with local actors, has produced counterproductive policies that may end up decreasing support for its policies on the ground and with Malian actors.


**Key challenges for the EU**

Hence, the EU struggles to tailor-make its policies to local contexts (conflict sensitivity) and to involve and include local actors in its crisis response (local ownership). While these cases are unique and must be understood on their own terms, there are commonalities that can help us paint a more general picture of the EU's implementation struggles. Several aspects stand out.

First, the EU's attempts to make conflict sensitivity and local ownership key ingredients of the design and implementation of crisis responses, ends up including only small doses of each. As concerns local ownership, its approach is at best 'minimalist', an approach in which (Mobekk 2010: 231) argues external interveners 'defines owners as governments and the

security sector leadership, and ownership as buy-in and occasional consultation'. While this may be better than not including any actors from the country at all, this severely limits the support for and effectiveness and impact of its crisis response. In Afghanistan, Iraq and Mali, the EU's involvement had the necessary support from the respective governments, but without that of local populations and often civil society organisations and others. Indeed, Gordon (2014: 130) suggests this is often the case; the voices of a variety of actors in society are not heard, and the security sector reform processes are primarily developed with the political and security elite or non-state actors. The EU's efforts in all cases seem to focus on securing the state rather than securing the people (Gordon 2014). While this approach may have strengthened security institutions in a specific moment, the lack of legitimacy within the population may render any long-term constructive impact void. In addition to local ownership, This suggests, moreover, that despite the EU's stated intentions of seeking conflict sensitive crisis response, and despite lessons learnt mechanisms developed (see Bátora et al. 2016a; 2016b), the EU still produces largely imported solutions largely designed in Brussels.

Second, the EU's crisis response is typically positively viewed by the populations it provides aid to, but few know what the EU is, what it seeks to do and what it actually does in these contexts. Often, neither academics, civil society organisations, local governments nor beneficiaries themselves show high awareness. From this observation, important implications follow: One is that lacking support from key actors like local governments and other crisis response actors, limits coordination and synergy effects through duplication and potentially counterproductive results. Moreover, as has been observed in all three cases, this lowers these actors' support for the EU's actions. While the EU may fund important interventions, these are not communicated to the right people, and these are—often—hampered by little interaction in all phases of the project with local organisations. In this article, the case of co-operation with local NGOs in Iraq was specifically noted, but also occurred in Afghanistan and Mali.

Third, while the EU seeks to engage in Afghanistan, Iraq and Mali to cause long-term and sustainable positive impact, its impact is restricted. In Afghanistan and Iraq, its interventions in the fields of rule of law and security sector reform are characterized by the training of officials and the police. While these trainings are often short, they may leave officials and policemen and policewomen with enhanced capabilities and knowledge. However, the greatest challenge comes in impacting the system as a whole, where both Afghanistan and Iraq come out of decades of authoritarian rule with high levels of corruption and impunity. Similar dynamics exist in Mali, where the training of soldiers and police may lead to short-term gains, but where lacking monitoring and follow-ups limit the impact of the trainings themselves.

Fourth, the EU's impact is limited by the security situations in which it operates and by the governments with which it cooperates. Any short-term gains made through the training of individuals in for example human rights, may often evaporate when these values face the inertia of the system and the nature of war in which these individuals act. Perverse incentives abound, where the interests of the civilian populations are often the last to be considered. While preconditions for security (and justice) sector reform are said to be the existence of a somewhat functioning system and this system's legitimacy, it is hard to argue these were in place before the EU interviewed. This does not imply that the EU's intervention was inherently incorrect, but that sets high expectations and requirements for the way this is supposed to be done. As is often the case—even in 2010s—the EU imports its ideas and engages to a very limited degree with local actors, and most commonly only with the political and security elite.

Does this mean, then, that the EU's search for 'a second-generation human security approach to conflicts' (Kaldor et al. 2018) remains elusive? It seems, indeed, that the EU continues to struggle with the implementation of it. While the new EU Global Strategy (2016) says the 'right' things, this is yet to be done on the ground. In many ways, there are still strong remnants of both the war on terror and the liberal peace that Kaldor et al. (2018) suggest one ought to move away from. In Afghanistan and Iraq, it is primarily the US which has led the militaristic and professed and preferred counterinsurgency. Here, the EU has sought to balance this with a more civilian approach. Some suggest, however, that the EU has accepted the US' more militaristic approach, while officially pursuing a civilian approach (Fescharek 2015: 48). Given the size of the US' military and the strength of its engagement in these countries, however, the EU's civilian approach is dwarfed.

Mali is different, where the US has a limited presence, and where France has the more militaristic approach. Also the EU itself has a more militaristic approach, where it does some justice sector work, but where the training of the police and military form the largest engagements. Certainly, its member state France played a key role in designing the intervention. In Mali, then, the EU contributes to the more overarching war on terror-approach of France and how this frames the larger UN operation here rather than the conflict sensitive and local ownership-based approach it professes in its policy documents.

**Conclusion**

For the population on the ground in Afghanistan, Iraq and Mali, the EU is often not known. While these people may feel the impact of the work that other actors do with funding from the EU, its support for the EU is limited. This has something to do with the small size of the EU's

actions—at least compared to the US/France and several UN organisations—but also the limited knowledge of what the EU does. The lacking knowledge of what the EU does, however, also points to lacking local ownership. Most often, the EU funds other organisations to implement its crisis response, and these are typically international ones. Moreover, the EU's approach is heavily criticised by local civil society organisations, local governments and academics for lacking conflict sensitivity. Sometimes, notably in Mali, its actions are based on false assumptions and more on its own agenda than the concerns of the local populations.

This is not to say that the EU does not care for local populations. Rather, politics—including the diverse interests of its member states—along with several EU-mechanisms and processes inherent to the interventions of external actors in fragile states and in theatres of war, convert good intentions into poorly designed interventions. These, again, limited the support for, effectiveness and ultimately impact of its crisis response in these countries.

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