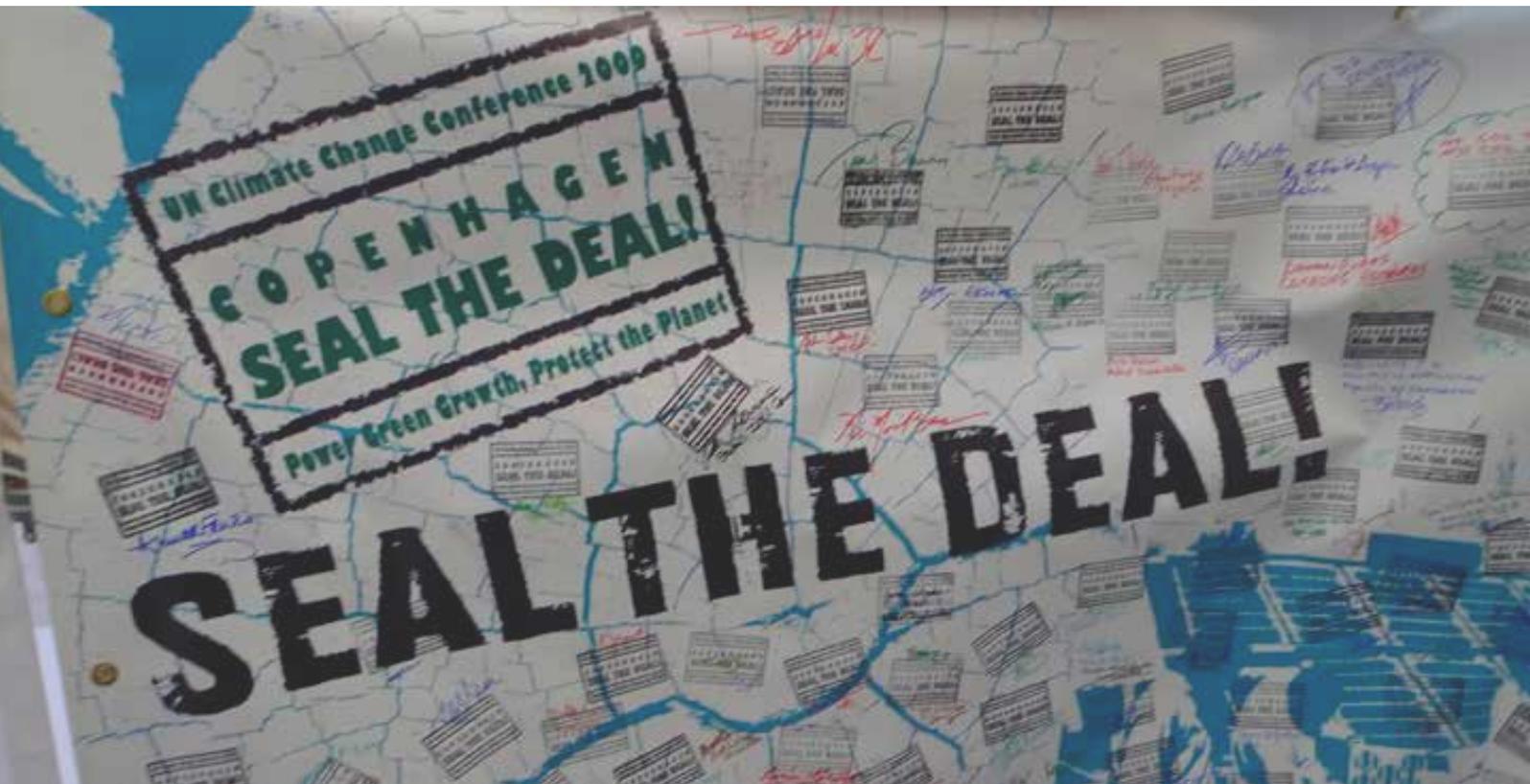


Conference report

CSOs and the European Union's external policies

GLOBUS policy dialogue



What role for CSOs in EU foreign policy?

What is the role of civil society organisations (CSOs) in the EU's foreign-policy making? And how do CSOs view the EU's ability to enhance global justice? On 29 May 2018, GLOBUS researchers met with CSO representatives in Brussels to discuss these questions.

Foreign and security policy is often thought of as an area with little transparency and public involvement. However, in a globalised world where states and private actors are increasingly interconnected, civil society organisations can play a key role. CSOs can be watchdogs, reminding EU institutions of their normative commitments, as well as point out discrepancies between the Union's commitments and actions. CSOs are also providers of different types of knowledge, which may be critical to improving EU policies. Finding the right course of action in order to enhance justice is not self-evident.

It is absolutely essential that the world of outsiders, and by that I mean academia, provides that conceptual clarity.

Nathalie Tocci, IAI

Connecting research and civil society experiences

The aim of the policy dialogue was to establish an arena for mutual learning between scholars and representatives of CSOs working on issues related to EU foreign policy. To what extent are CSOs able to act as critical interlocutors to the EU in this area? Can they actually influence how the EU approaches the world outside its borders? What role can CSOs play in reframing public discourses on issues of relevance to global justice?

More than 20 CSOs from different fields contributed to the dialogue. They work across a range of areas that the EU-funded research project GLOBUS (*Reconsidering European Contributions to Global Justice*) addresses: trade and development, climate change, migration, gender and human rights, security and conflict resolution.

Open environment for debate

The world café format allowed for an effective and fruitful dialogue between a large group of CSO representatives and GLOBUS researchers. CSOs shared experiences from their respective fields of expertise, including good practices and challenges in their work with the EU. The world café consisted of two

rounds of discussions: one focusing on challenges, and one on solutions. Each group was led by a GLOBUS researcher who contributed with perspectives from her/his research, including concrete evidence and critical standards for thinking about justice beyond states' borders.

Two keynote speakers, Nathalie Tocci and Madeleine Rees, international experts on EU foreign policy and human rights, raised key issues concerning civil society engagement in the EU.



Nathalie Tocci is Director of Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI). She drafted the EU Global Strategy as special advisor to the EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Federica Mogherini. In the dialogue, Tocci addressed the dual role of civil society in EU foreign policy.

Madeleine Rees is Secretary General of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom. In the dialogue, she shared from her wide experience as a human rights lawyer and as head of office and gender expert for the UN in Bosnia and Herzegovina, facing challenges related to human rights abuses and trafficking in conflict areas.

Key questions in the debate

- How do CSOs assess the EU's approach towards states and citizens outside the EU?
- How do CSOs work with the EU?
- What is the role of CSOs in EU foreign policy?
- What main challenges do CSOs face in their work with the EU?
- How to tackle these challenges?

Challenges for CSO–EU cooperation

The CSOs main concern was how to effectively influence EU policies. Challenges included lack of feedback from the EU, as well as CSOs themselves working in ‘silos’.

A tick-the-box exercise?

Critical voices are crucial for a democratic political process. CSOs can contribute to this by acting as a watchdog of EU policies. The knowledge provided by CSOs is also important to decide what is the best course of action on specific issues. The EU uses public hearings and consultations to give civil society a space for acting as a critical voice and knowledge provider. While some explained that hearings had proffered a constructive dialogue between the EU and civil society, others dismissed the EU’s efforts as a simple ‘tick-the-box’ procedure. There is always a risk that CSO consultations become a symbolic exercise, with no real effects on policies or practice. As such, they may serve as a shallow attempt to legitimise political decisions in the EU, rather than improving them.

CSO representatives argued that it can be difficult to discern whether the EU is looking for a symbolic stamp of approval, or if there is actually room for providing constructive feedback or critique. A key challenge for CSOs is identifying the right opportunities for effective influence. This is particularly important in a time where shrinking space for civil society in public debates is becoming a global phenomenon, argued the CSOs.

Striving for influence

A main concern for CSOs during the discussions was to find effective ways to secure influence for their opinions at the EU level. CSOs explained that meaningful dialogues with representatives from one EU institution do not guarantee that their message is communicated to other institutions involved in the same process. Most CSOs emphasised that personal contacts within the EU system are critically important. The chance of their message reaching actual decision makers is also higher when communicating with member state delegations.

CSOs have a dual role. They are autonomous actors with other priorities and concerns than those of the EU executive. But they also partner with the EU on concrete issues and initiatives. To what extent does this partnership affect their role as independent knowledge providers? CSOs might be more efficient

critics when they are familiar with the workings of the policy-making system, and are well known and trusted by decision makers. This might explain why participants focused on the challenges of reaching the right people in the EU system during the dialogue. CSOs’ place as autonomous actors in the public sphere is also important.

CSO’s experience and links to citizens also provides a unique perspective to policy-making. EU institutions have a vested interest in ensuring that such expertise is integrated into policy-making – as well as developing links to CSOs as key voices in a ‘public space’ at European level.



Working in ‘silos’

The challenge of civil society ‘working in silos’ was a recurring theme and the need for increased coordination was highlighted. The most important concerns that the CSOs seek to communicate to the EU run the risk of being lost in a wall of demands. For instance, similar concerns might be framed in various ways by different organisations. Larger coalitions can be important when operating in the public sphere, to enhance awareness and trigger public debates on issues of global justice.

Key challenges

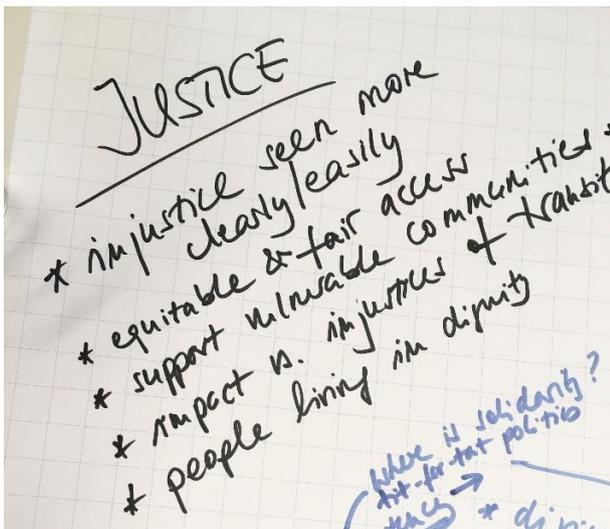
- Identifying the right opportunities for influence
- Lack of systematic approach for including civil society feedback in the EU
- Overarching challenge: Shrinking space for civil society in public debates

Solutions for better cooperation and influence

Participants were invited to suggest solutions to the challenges discussed. Discussions ranged from best practice examples in their lobbying towards the EU, to more robust systems for consultations and feedback.

Benefits of coordinated efforts

The International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN), 2017 Nobel Peace Prize Laureate, was highlighted as a best practice example when it comes to influencing the EU. ICAN coordinates the work of several NGOs making sure that their message reaches all relevant policy makers. They work continuously with identifying weak points in their campaign, and have a comprehensive presence in forums reaching from 'meet and greets' to political dialogues with top decision makers.



CSOs particularly commended the ICAN model for its ability to limit advocacy efforts to a list of clear and specific goals and targeted messaging. They argued that simple and clear messages were more likely to have an effect on EU policy makers. Meanwhile, the example of ICAN also reveals the challenge of balancing between simplicity and substance. Many issues are more complex and context-bound than a global call for the abolishment of nuclear weapons.

Striking the right balance between effective campaigning and communicating more complex arguments remains a challenge. The discussions on this topic seemed to be tipping in favour of an increased need for effective campaigns.

Feedback from EU necessary

When it comes to the EU's more formalised political dialogues with civil society, several participants called for feedback from the EU on how their input to public hearings and consultations was handled. Receiving feedback on which suggestions or demands that were taken into account, as well as a justification for those that were not included, was proposed as a way to clarify messages and avoid being part of the simple tick-the-box exercises.

You need robust consultation mechanisms. When we are consulted it tends to be for the design of EU policies, but civil society input on the implementation, monitoring and evaluation of these policies is just as – if not more – important.

Lorenzo Angelini, EPLO

A requirement of 'feedback on feedback' was also seen as a possible means to make the EU consider civil society input more seriously.

Potential solutions

- Enhance coordination and thematic networking among CSOs
- Enhance CSO presence in multiple forums
- Focus on few and clear messages
- Structured and meaningful EU feedback on CSOs' proposals
- Create more robust systems for consultations with the EU
- Secure CSO involvement in policy design, implementation and monitoring.

Why a dialogue between CSOs and researchers?

For GLOBUS, it is important to engage with multiple stakeholders of the project's research fields, including civil society. This engagement provides a better understanding of what are considered to be reasonable ways of enhancing justice at the global level, as well as advantages and disadvantages of different approaches. CSO representatives underlined that research is important as a resource basis in their work.

Resource basis for civil society

Several participants at the dialogue underlined the importance of research. Some organisations brought up the need for more research on the ground in order to better understand the needs of those groups or fields they are working for. Research can also provide important analytical tools allowing civil society to disentangle the many-faceted principled dilemmas of justice arising in the global context and enable them to propose solutions that are normatively acceptable and have substantial impact. In this way, research can provide a resource basis for civil society organisations to make better and more informed decisions.

Academia can help to analyse our paradigms. There is a need for deep-level thinking.

Rachel Bayani, Baha'i Intl' Community

On the one hand, there is room for improvement on working conceptually and analytically within civil society organisations. On the other, academics must strive to clarify concepts and make academic terms meaningful for real-world situations. Creating spaces for dialogue between researchers and civil society was considered a promising way to stimulate critical thinking and reframing the discourse on topics of joint interest.

Valuable insights from stakeholders

The challenges and solutions that were discussed by CSOs and researchers at the world café give the project a much better understanding of CSO's work methods. Researchers also had the opportunity to acquire valuable insights into CSO's role in the EUs foreign policy.

The meeting gave us important insights from policy practitioners that will feed in to our research. CSOs are important independent knowledge providers. As such, their role as critical interlocutors is important in any debate on how to enhance global justice.

Helene Sjursen, GLOBUS Scientific Coordinator

Participating organisations

- ACP Young Professionals Network
- Amnesty International
- Baha'i International Community
- Change Partnership
- Christian-Aid
- Coopération Internationale pour le Développement et la Solidarité (CIDSE)
- Climate Action Network (CAN)
- EuroMed Rights
- European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE)
- European Network of Migrant Women (ENOMW)
- European Network of National Human Rights Institutions (ENNHRI)
- European Peacebuilding Liaison Office (EPLO)
- European Women's Lobby (EWL)
- European-Uzbekistan Council on Business & Investments
- German Marshall Fund of the US
- International Center for Transitional Justice (ICTJ)
- Institute for Environmental Policy (IIEP)
- Migration Policy Institute
- NGO Shipbreaking Platform
- Pax Christi
- Quaker Council for European Affairs
- Save the Children
- World Wildlife Fund (WWF)

GLOBUS combines normative and empirical research to critically examine the EU's contribution to ensure global justice. GLOBUS studies the contents and conduct of the EU's external policies with a focus on climate justice, migration, trade and development, peace and conflict resolution, gender and human rights.

The project has eight partner universities in Brazil, China, Germany, India, Ireland, Italy, Norway, and South Africa.

Join our policy network

GLOBUS engages with a wide range of policy stakeholders through our policy network, representing policy makers and governments, international organisations, civil society, think tanks, and interest groups.

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