

# MAINTAINING PRINCIPLED ENGAGEMENT IN FRAGILE CONTEXTS: CONCERN WORLDWIDE'S EXPERIENCE IN NIGER AND AFGHANISTAN

## THE ISSUE

### FRAGILITY: THE COST OF INACTION



Afghanistan © Concern Worldwide

In September 2024, the EU Commissioner for Preparedness and Crisis Management was tasked with developing a 'Commission-wide integrated approach to fragility, to ensure that humanitarian, development, peace and other policies all work together to better link urgent relief and longer-term solutions.'<sup>1</sup> At the same time, the EU Commissioner for International Partnerships was asked to 'support a differentiated approach with regard to Least Developed Countries by focusing more effectively on their specific vulnerabilities and to conflict areas, fragile countries, and other complex settings [...]'.<sup>2</sup> Designed well, these approaches can steer EU external action to save lives, enable meaningful engagement, reduce vulnerabilities and improve development outcomes in fragile contexts, in line with European values and commitments to advance the 2030 Agenda, which has faltered in most high and extreme fragility contexts, according to the [OECD States of Fragility 2025](#) report.

To advance EU nexus commitments, the Commission-wide *Integrated Approach to Fragility and Differentiated approach for LDCs* must go beyond humanitarian interventions and include carefully designed development approaches to enable people living in such contexts to progress from meeting basic needs to

more sustainable human and economic development. Concern Worldwide's experience in education programmes in Niger and supporting women-led agriculture businesses in Afghanistan demonstrates that even in highly fragile contexts it is possible for EU-supported programming to maintain principled engagement and to strengthen resilience and human development.

## CONFLICT SENSITIVITY AT THE CENTRE OF PROGRAMME DESIGN

Education is disrupted and undermined by conflict when schools are destroyed or occupied by parties to conflict, teachers and learners are displaced or intimidated, and unsafe environments limit access to education and learning opportunities. As of April 2025, 1,032 schools were closed in Tillabéri alone, leaving 89,514 children out of school and exposed to risk of enrolment in non-state armed groups, child marriage, and various forms of exploitation.

Concern implemented the [Learning Together](#) programme from October 2020 to June 2025 (funded by Agence française de développement) to enable children

1. See EU Commission President Ursula Von der Leyen [Mission Letter](#) to EU Commissioner for Preparedness and Crisis Management, Hadja Lahbib, Sep 2024  
2. See EU Commission President Ursula Von der Leyen [Mission Letter](#) the EU Commissioner for International Partnerships, Jozef Síkela, Sep 2024

## > CASE STUDY: CONFLICT-SENSITIVE EDUCATION ANALYSIS IN NIGER

A comprehensive conflict-sensitive education analysis was the first stage of Concern's *Learning Together* programme in Tillabéri and Tahoua. The programme team collected detailed information on the risks, conflict dynamics and links between education and conflict. They assessed the conflict sensitivity of Concern's planned intervention with communities and identified opportunities to maximise potential positive effects on peace and social cohesion and minimise any negative effects. Gender and social inclusion dimensions were integrated throughout the analysis to capture how contextual and conflict dynamics, along with school-related risk factors, affect individuals across genders, abilities, and socio-economic groups.

Over 180 focus groups and interviews were conducted with inspectors and pedagogical advisors, teachers and headmasters, parents of children in and out of school, and children themselves.

Interviewees described the situation in their villages, the presence of parties to the conflict, illegal tax collection, and their fear of attacks and kidnappings. They described how schools and teachers have been specifically targeted by attacks, resulting in schools being closed either because buildings have been burnt down, threats have been made or because teachers are unwilling to teach in these areas. Girls, who are more likely to be out of school and married off at a young age, and people with disabilities, who are heavily dependent on others for their safety, are particularly vulnerable.

The activities proposed by Concern were discussed in detail with interviewees in order to assess possible risks, to analyse Concern's conflict approach and to co-create mitigation measures to be put in place by the communities, by Concern and by partners. Continuous monitoring of the conflict dynamics throughout the programme cycle led to adaptations to prioritise the security of the children, their teachers, and their communities.

affected by the security crisis in the Tillabéri and Tahoua regions to access safe and quality education. Three groups of displaced, refugee or resident children were prioritised: students enrolled in primary schools in the project's intervention communes; children living within the school catchment areas but not attending school for more than a year; and children in areas where insecurity has kept schools closed for extended periods.

The programme components were underpinned by the findings of a comprehensive Conflict-Sensitive Education analysis (see case study). These included an *Interactive audio curriculum* to support over 3,000 children in conflict-affected areas - gathering in small, discreet 'learning clubs' in safe spaces identified by the community - to continue learning in areas with schools closed due to insecurity. *Accelerated bridging classes* helped 6,310 out-of-school children to re-enter formal education and Distance video-coaching, using tablets and smartphones, supported teachers and facilitators to improve their teaching practice in areas inaccessible due to insecurity, benefiting more than 7,110 children.

The EU recognises the transformational impact of education for development and has included Education (including for vulnerable groups) as a priority of its

[Global Gateway Strategy](#). Education also reduces protection risks—such as forced recruitment of boys into armed groups, and for girls, early marriage, heightened exposure to gender-based violence, and increased birth rates. Persistently low access to education for girls entrenches the economic marginalisation of women in fragile contexts. As it develops the *Integrated Approach to Fragility* and advances a *Differentiated Approach for LDCs*, the EU has an opportunity to safeguard education for vulnerable children and maximise its transformative potential in fragile settings.

In Afghanistan, through the AWARE programme (2021-2025), Concern and partners supported unemployed and underemployed women, and existing women-led micro and small agribusinesses with potential for sustainable scale-up. Supporting women's economic empowerment in this context requires extreme sensitivity, with careful attention to the economic sector selection. In Afghanistan, agriculture is a culturally appropriate and accessible entry point for women. Technical training, along with assets and business and marketing support was provided to Women's Agribusiness Collectives in the dairy, fruit, almond, saffron and vegetable value chains.

“Flexibility of donor visibility requirements means that activities can discretely continue in politically sensitive and insecure environments.”

The programme fostered a more supportive environment for women’s involvement in economic activities at the household and community levels by proactively engaging men, boys and influential religious leaders. Trainings and dialogues created an enabling environment for women to start and grow their businesses, increase decision-making in areas such as land and property, household saving, borrowing and spending, and to be able to gather and socialise in women’s collectives, which women participants reported as being beneficial for their mental health.

## ENGAGING WITH AUTHORITIES

Given the continued insecurity in Niger, which can abruptly restrict education actors’ ability to operate, the Ministry of Education (MoE) recognises the value of tools like distance teacher support and audio-based learning to maintain access to, and continuity of, quality education for children affected by crises. It was crucial to partner with education authorities, including the Ministry of Primary Education and Regional Directorates, as well as the Inspectorate of Literacy and Non-Formal Education, to ensure that the programme supported the National Education Sector Plan and to ensure quality control of formal and non-formal education within programme areas. Programme components were co-designed with the MoE, aligned to MoE standards, and supported by its pedagogical advisers. The programme also aligned with education initiatives of other actors and worked to harmonize approaches across Niger.

Partnerships with local NGOs enabled community mobilisation and support, and programme monitoring in highly insecure areas.

The AWARE programme in Afghanistan was implemented over a period of challenging changes to the context, including Covid-19, armed conflict in northern provinces, the change of political regime and gender-based restrictions. The Concern team and partners demonstrated strong skills in working with local authorities in this environment. With frequent uncertainty around what activities women were permitted to undertake, daily negotiations were often required. A key strength of this programme was its consortium model, with partners leveraging their respective networks to sustain continuous dialogue with local authorities, thereby ensuring programme activities could continue. The approach to engaging authorities—acknowledging the sensitivity of the context while bringing them on board—proved to be highly effective.



Video coaching for a listening club © Concern Worldwide

## BALANCING ACCOUNTABILITY WITH NEEDS

Concern’s experience in Niger and Afghanistan is that longer-term programming facilitates greater flexibility and adaptability and supports stronger impacts. In both contexts, planned targets were surpassed by the end of the programmes, despite challenging, insecure and evolving contexts which meant certain activities experienced delays, some budgets were not spent at expected paces, and at times coordination was difficult. As well as careful engagement with authorities, it is critical that programme teams operating in fragile contexts allocate sufficient time and resources to ensure community members fully understand and support the selection criteria and the activities being implemented, to reduce potential tensions caused by misinformation or lack of information. Flexibility of donor visibility requirements means that activities can discretely continue in politically sensitive and insecure environments.

## CONCLUSIONS

To maximise the impact of EU external action in fragile contexts, policymakers across the European Commission, the European External Action Service, and Member States must ensure that EU external action is informed by local realities and draws on civil society’s experience and best practices in supporting at-risk communities in situations of extreme fragility. This will require sufficient time for consultations with civil society—especially organisations based in fragile contexts—so that programming is appropriately designed, context-specific, and grounded in the perspectives of those engaged in consultations and in programme implementation.

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