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Institutional and External Affairs

CIVEX

The Role of Local and Regional Authorities and Decentralised Cooperation in Fragile Settings: Building on the Nicosia Initiative in Libya



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List of abbreviations

AIMF	<i>Association Internationale des Maires Francophones</i>
ALDA	Association of Local Democracy Agencies
AFAD	Disaster and Emergency Management Authority (Türkiye)
ARLEM	Euro Mediterranean Assembly of Regional and Local Authorities
CEMR	Council of European Municipalities and Regions
CIDOB	<i>Centre d'Informació i Documentació Internacionals a Barcelona</i>
CLGF	Commonwealth Local Government Forum
CoR	Committee of the Regions
CRRF	Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework
CSOs	Civil Society Organisations
DAC	OECD's Development Assistance Committee
DG INTPA	Directorate-General for International Partnerships (EC)
EC	European Commission
EEAS	European External Action Service
EP	European Parliament
EU	European Union
FDI	Foreign Direct Investment
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GNI	Gross National Income
HDP	Humanitarian-Development-Peace (Nexus)
IDPs	Internally Displaced Persons
INCAF	International Network on Conflict and Fragility
LA	Local Authorities
LDCs	Least Developed Countries
LRAs	Local and Regional Authorities
MC2CM	Mediterranean City-to-City Migration
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
MFF	Multiannual Financial Framework
MS	EU Member States
MSC	Municipal Social Cell
NGOs	Non-Governmental Organisations
ODA	Official Development Assistance
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PALPGL	<i>Plateforme des Autorités Locales des Pays des Grands Lacs</i>
REBUILD	Research and Education Building Urban Institutions for Local Development
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SUIDAC	Sustainable Urban Integration of Displacement-Affected Communities

TAMP	Turkey Disaster Response Plan
TAMSALL	Towards A New Multi-level Shared Approach for Libya Local Governance
TBB/UMT	Union of Municipalities of Türkiye
TIPS4UA	Training and Innovation Programme for Subnational Authorities for Ukraine
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UCDP	Uppsala Conflict Data Program
UCLG	United Cities and Local Governments
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNFCCC	United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change
US	United States
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
WB	World Bank

Executive summary

Fragility and instability have become defining features of the European Union's (EU's) external environment, particularly in its neighbourhood and in countries affected by conflict, protracted crises, political transitions and climate-related shocks. Over time, the EU's approach to fragility has evolved from predominantly state-centred and sectoral interventions towards a more integrated approach, linking development, peace, humanitarian action and diplomacy. However, policy analysis and operational experience increasingly demonstrate that fragility is not only a national phenomenon; it is deeply rooted in territorial inequalities, governance failures and service delivery gaps that manifest at the local level.

This study responds to the growing recognition that local and regional authorities (LRAs) play a central role in preventing, mitigating and responding to fragility.

Drawing on recent international academic and policy literature, semi-structured interviews with experts and practitioners, as well as selected case studies, the study's findings suggest that weak decentralisation, limited empowerment of local authorities and fragile local governance systems are frequently identified as drivers of instability. Conversely, where local authorities are able to exercise meaningful competences, deliver basic services and maintain proximity to citizens, they can act as stabilising actors even in highly fragile contexts. The study, therefore, makes the case for strengthening the local dimension of the EU's integrated approach to fragility along two complementary lines:

- First, it consolidates the evidence indicating that decentralisation and effective local governance are important factors for resilience and stability and should be incorporated more systematically into EU strategies aimed at preventing fragility and instability.
- Second, it examines how decentralised cooperation and city and subnational diplomacy can serve as practical tools enabling the EU to remain engaged in fragile settings, where large-scale programmes or direct cooperation with national governments may be politically or operationally constrained.

The analysis highlights that decentralised cooperation – including city-to-city and region-to-region partnerships – offers specific advantages in fragile environments. Such cooperation is typically demand-driven, focused on concrete local competences and less politically sensitive than state-level engagement. When designed in a conflict-sensitive manner, decentralised cooperation can strengthen institutional capacity, support service delivery, foster peer learning and build trust among local actors.

Closely linked to this, the study underlines the growing relevance of city and subnational diplomacy as part of the EU's external action toolbox. Subnational diplomatic engagement can complement traditional diplomacy by maintaining dialogue, supporting confidence-building and facilitating cooperation across conflict lines or political divides. Platforms involving LRAs can provide practical spaces for such engagement, especially in contexts where national-level political relations are stalled or contested.

A central focus of the study is the Nicosia Initiative on decentralised cooperation between the EU and Libya, which is analysed as a concrete and long-standing example of how decentralised cooperation can operate in a highly fragile and conflict-affected setting. Since 2016, the Initiative has provided a structured and politically neutral framework for cooperation between Libyan municipalities and European local authorities, facilitated by the European Committee of the Regions (CoR). Beyond its contribution to improving municipal capacities and service delivery, the Nicosia Initiative has also demonstrated the political value of decentralised cooperation. By bringing together municipalities from different parts of Libya and maintaining engagement throughout periods of open conflict, the Initiative has supported dialogue across divides and reinforced the role of municipalities as legitimate governance actors within a fragmented institutional landscape.

The study further examines a set of additional fragile and unstable contexts to assess the potential transferability of decentralised cooperation, as well as city and subnational diplomacy approaches. While recognising that fragile settings differ significantly in terms of governance structures, conflict dynamics and local capacities, the analysis shows that many contexts share characteristics that make subnational engagement both relevant and feasible.

Taken together, the study's findings indicate that decentralised cooperation and subnational diplomacy provide the EU with flexible, context-sensitive instruments to support stability, resilience and dialogue at the local level. Accordingly, decentralised cooperation should be seen as a complementary tool that can be strategically deployed as part of the EU's integrated approach to fragility. The study concludes that strengthening the role of LRAs in the EU's engagement in fragile settings is both necessary and timely.

Introduction

Fragility and instability are increasingly defining features of many countries in the European Union (EU) neighbourhood and beyond. Political fragmentation, institutional collapse, violent conflict and cascading crises are reshaping the EU's external environment, particularly in its Southern Neighbourhood, the wider African region and parts of Eastern Europe, alongside the growing effects of climate change, environmental degradation and natural hazards. These dynamics challenge the EU's ability to act through traditional state-to-state channels, while further complicating the provision of development and humanitarian assistance and peacebuilding efforts. Moreover, the consequences of fragility – ranging from economic disruption and security risks to irregular migration, among others – demonstrate the need for a more sustainable, adaptable and locally-oriented EU engagement in fragile and conflict-affected contexts.

In many fragile settings, local and regional authorities (LRAs) remain the closest level of government to citizens, and are often the only functioning public institutions capable of providing essential services, supporting social cohesion and sustaining a minimum level of governance. Analysis by the EU and other international organisations – such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the World Bank (WB) – increasingly emphasises the stabilising role of LRAs and the importance of decentralisation in mitigating the drivers of fragility. For the Committee of the Regions (CoR), strengthening the local dimension of the EU's external action aligns with longstanding priorities related to multi-level governance, resilience and the empowerment of LRAs.

Fragility rarely respects administrative boundaries. Its effects spill across regions and borders, making multi-level and cross-border cooperation particularly essential. Decentralised cooperation and city or subnational diplomacy have therefore emerged as practical tools for maintaining EU engagement where national-level cooperation is constrained. The experience of the Nicosia Initiative in Libya, launched and supported by the CoR, illustrates how peer-to-peer municipal partnerships can improve service provision, help rebuild institutional capacities, and ultimately create political channels for dialogue even in highly fragmented environments.

Against this backdrop, **the objective of this study is to provide analytical arguments in support of a stronger local focus within the EU's integrated approach to address fragility.** In particular, the research seeks to contribute at two complementary levels: first, by consolidating the evidence base demonstrating that decentralisation and effective local governance can act as

powerful factors of stability and resilience; and second, by examining how decentralised cooperation and city or subnational diplomacy can enable the EU to remain meaningfully engaged in fragile settings, including through the potential transfer of lessons from the Nicosia Initiative to other contexts.

Methodologically, the study is based on a comprehensive review of academic and policy literature, complemented by semi-structured interviews with experts and practitioners, as well as an analysis of selected case studies.

While this study was being drafted, the European Commission (EC) was still working on a Staff Working Document annexed to the Communication on the EU's humanitarian action, for publication in the second half of May 2026. The document will include considerations on how to intervene in fragile contexts, in an increasingly unstable geopolitical environment. Hence, the study is addressed primarily to the CoR, notably in view of its forthcoming work on international partnerships. It is also of relevance to EU institutions and bodies involved in the local dimension of external action, including the EC, the European External Action Service (EEAS) and the European Parliament (EP), as well as to associations of LRAs and other stakeholders engaged in decentralised cooperation and subnational diplomacy.

This study is organised as follows:

- Part 1 sets out a conceptual and policy overview of fragility and the evolution of EU and international approaches;
- Part 2 presents an analysis of the local dimensions of fragility, including the links between decentralisation, local governance and stability;
- Part 3 outlines the findings on the role of decentralised cooperation and subnational diplomacy in fragile settings;
- Part 4 provides reflections on the Nicosia Initiative;
- Part 5 presents six illustrative examples identifying fragile contexts with potential for enhanced decentralised cooperation;
- The conclusions synthesise the findings and set out strategic orientations for the EU and CoR action.

1. Fragility and instability: Evolution of the EU and other actors

Over the past decade, global instability has deepened across political, economic and social dimensions. This chapter outlines key global trends underpinning this assessment and defines the core concepts of fragility, resilience and the Humanitarian-Development-Peace (HDP) Nexus. It then examines how the EU engages with these concepts and presents an overview of other major providers of aid and financial assistance. The chapter concludes by exploring the geopolitical implications of recent declines in aid from the United States (US) and the EU.

In 2024, global freedom declined for the nineteenth consecutive year (OECD, 2025). **48 countries saw setbacks in political rights and civil liberties, while only 18 improved, underscoring a broader deterioration in democratic standards** (OECD, 2025). This sustained erosion is reflected in regime-type patterns; **around 71% of the world's population now lives in autocracies, up from 48% ten years ago** (V-Dem Institute, 2024)¹. Together, these indicators point to worsening trends in global politics. Beyond democratic backsliding, the incidence and intensity of armed conflict and disaster-related events have also increased. The Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) recorded **61 state-involved conflicts in 2024, the highest number since 1946**, and reported the fourth most violent year since the 1994 Rwandan genocide (UCDP, 2025). Climate- and disaster-related risks compound these pressures. In 2024, the Centre for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters (CRED) registered 393 natural hazard-related disasters, which killed 16,753 people, affected 167.2 million, and caused losses of USD 241.95 billion (CRED, 2025). **Escalating armed conflicts and extreme weather-related disasters have also translated into record levels of forced displacement, reaching 123.2 million people by the end of 2024**, as reported by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, 2024).

Taken together, these trends point to a world that is increasingly exposed to overlapping crises and conditions under which fragility becomes more widespread and harder to reverse. The next section, therefore, turns to the concepts of fragility and resilience as a way to make sense of these overlapping pressures and their implications for international development and humanitarian assistance.

¹ See Annex, Table 1, for key trends in fragility across the six dimensions (security, economic, political, environmental, societal and human).

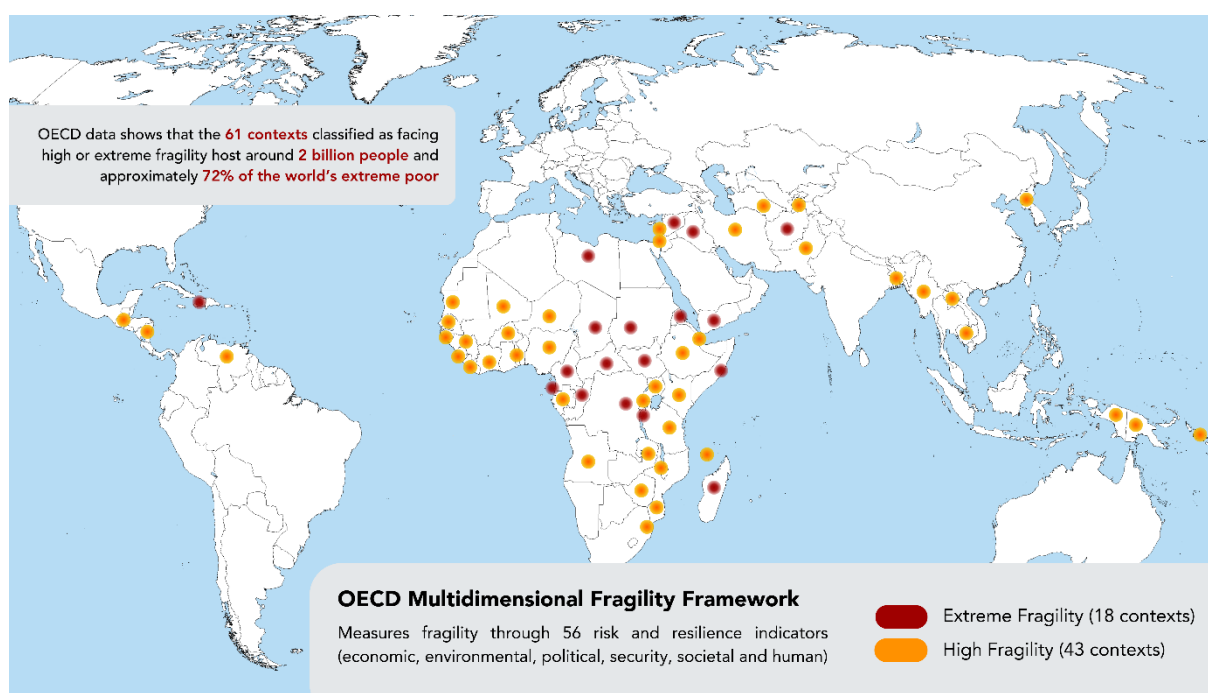
1.1 Concepts and definitions

a) Fragility & resilience

Fragility – defined by the OECD *as the combination of exposure to complex governance, social, economic, environmental vulnerabilities and risks, as well as the insufficient resilience of a state, system or community to manage, absorb and mitigate those risks* (OECD, 2016) and **conflict** are now among the most significant barriers to poverty eradication and sustainable development (WB, 2025). Accordingly, international policy debates have increasingly turned to fragility and resilience as core concepts for understanding and managing today’s overlapping political and humanitarian crises.

Crucially, the concept of fragility has evolved from labelling a specific *group of fragile states* to **recognising fragility as a universal phenomenon that can affect all contexts** (understood as territories rather than strictly states) along a spectrum of extreme, high, medium and low fragility as shown in Figure 1 below (OECD, 2025).

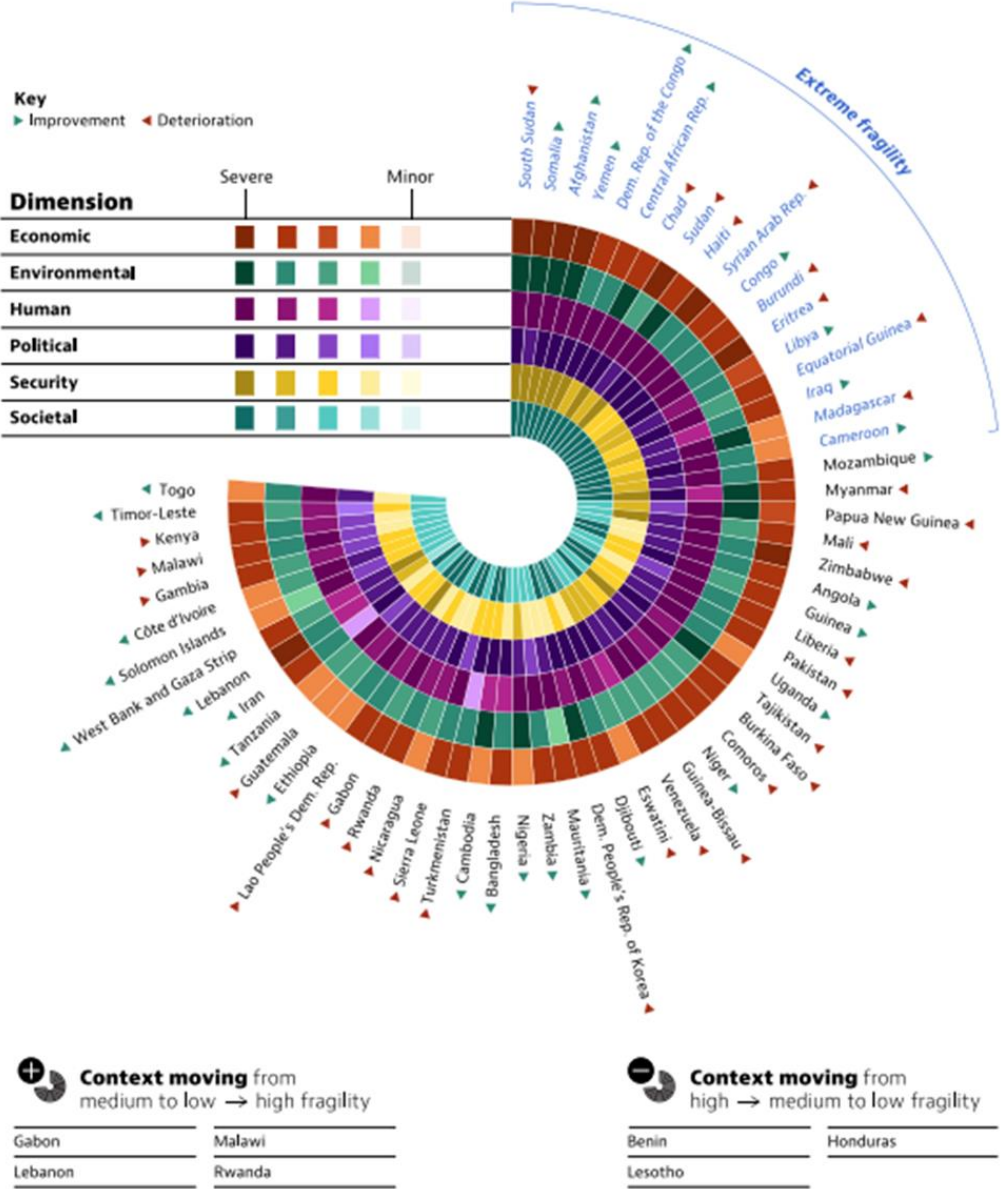
Figure 1. Mapping fragile contexts world-wide



Source: Developed by the authors, based on OECD's State of Fragility data (2025).

The OECD now measures fragility across 177 contexts using a multidimensional index that aggregates 56 indicators across six dimensions.² Current data shows that the **61 contexts classified as facing high or extreme fragility host around 2 billion people and approximately 72% of the world’s extreme poor** (OECD, 2025).

Figure 2. The OECD’s multidimensional fragility framework



Source: OECD’s States of Fragility report (2025, p. 51).

OECD projections suggest that by 2040, up to 92% of people living in extreme poverty could be concentrated in such highly fragile contexts (OECD, 2025).

² See Annex, Table 2, for the full list of fragility indicators.

At the same time, global economic and development trajectories have diverged, as incomes in contexts facing high and extreme fragility stopped converging with those in less fragile contexts around 2015, entrenching a *two-track global recovery* (OECD, 2025). The OECD argues that these trends require a reassessment of existing development and assistance practices to meet the goal of decreasing fragility levels globally, and its work on fragility has influenced other international actors' frameworks (OECD, 2025). **To address fragility and foster more resilient societies, the EU and other international actors channel support to contexts experiencing extreme or high fragility through a mix of humanitarian assistance, development cooperation, peacebuilding, peacekeeping and conflict prevention measures.**

b) Humanitarian-Development-Peace (HDP) nexus

The HDP nexus refers to efforts to **strengthen coherence between humanitarian, development and peace actions** to reduce people's risks and vulnerabilities and to address the underlying causes of crises, rather than responding only to their symptoms (OECD, 2019). In fragile contexts, this implies that humanitarian and development agencies, peacebuilding actors, national governments, LRAs, civil society organisations (CSOs) and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) work together on joint, risk-informed, conflict- and gender-sensitive analysis; engage in planning and co-ordination; uphold the core humanitarian principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence; mobilise and allocate funding appropriately for fragile and conflict-affected settings (OECD, 2019).

The OECD's Development Assistance Committee (DAC) Recommendation on the HDP Nexus is widely regarded as a key international standard for advancing this approach. While it did not create the nexus concept, it consolidated it and committed DAC members, EU institutions and United Nations (UN) agencies to translate the nexus into concrete operational practices and financing approaches (International Network on Conflict and Fragility, 2024).

Yet implementation remains unbalanced. In 2023, Official Development Assistance (ODA) and other concessional finance reached record levels, with USD 92 billion going to contexts facing high and extreme fragility. Of DAC members' ODA to these contexts, 31% was humanitarian aid, 58.6% development assistance and **only 10.4% was allocated to peace initiatives** (OECD, 2025). Reportedly, **peace-related ODA is now at its second-lowest level since 2004, while humanitarian ODA has reached a record high** (OECD, 2025). This pattern indicates a drift towards reactive responses and the neglect of conflict prevention, including in subnational contexts of extreme fragility. In response, recent analysis by The International Network on Conflict and Fragility (INCAF)

calls for a rebalancing of ODA across the three pillars and a shift in crisis-response models towards locally grounded socio-economic and political sources of resilience and conflict prevention, more collective programming and financing, and analysis of local drivers of fragility (INCAF, 2024).

In highly fragile and contested environments, effective HDP approaches also depend on how international actors engage with different levels of governance. Where national authorities do not exercise full control over the territory, HDP actors often work directly with local communities, CSOs and other non-state actors. Even where central governments are present, LRAs are often well positioned to understand community-level conflict dynamics, mediate tensions, promote dialogue and rebuild trust in settings where national authorities or international actors may lack legitimacy. **As anchored actors that remain before, during and after crises, LRAs are frequently on the front line of local responses and are critical to sustaining a shift from humanitarian emergency towards development and resilience** (Van der Pluijm & Melissen, 2007). At the same time, supporting locally led approaches requires donors to accept higher levels of risk, and work with divergent local interests and actors, while committing to long-term engagement rather than a proliferation of short-term humanitarian and/or development projects (INCAF, 2024).

Cooperation with LRAs to advance more comprehensive HDP initiatives can take various forms, including decentralised cooperation, for example. The local dimensions of fragility and the potential stabilising effects of decentralisation and empowered LRAs are explored in depth in Chapter 2.

1.2 Approaches to fragility, resilience and the HDP nexus

a) The European Union's approach

The EU and its Member States (MS) collectively remain the largest provider of ODA globally, accounting for 42% in 2023 (EUR 95.9 billion) (European Commission, 2024; OECD, 2025). In 2023 (the latest year with comprehensive data available), EU and MS ODA to contexts classified by the OECD as extremely fragile totalled EUR 9.0 billion, while allocations to high-fragility contexts reached EUR 20.4 billion (Team Europe, n.d.). In fragile and conflict-affected settings, the EU states that its primary objective is to address the root causes of fragility while ensuring access to essential services and supporting population resilience across the HDP nexus (European Commission, 2025c). **Critics, however, question whether the EU's current instruments (particularly the Global Gateway investment agenda) are equipped to deliver on these**

ambitions in practice (Bargués, et al., 2020; Bossuyt, & Sabourin, 2024; Bossuyt, & Sainaghi, 2025; Fernández de Losada, et al., 2023; Giancesello, & Desmidt, 2025; Desmidt, et al., 2024).

EU policy frameworks on fragility and resilience have evolved over the past decade. The 2016 EU Global Strategy reframed fragility beyond the Union's borders as a direct challenge to European vital interests and positioned resilience as a strategic priority (EEAS, 2016). The Strategy also introduced an *integrated approach* to crises, calling for flexible, multi-level engagement across the entire conflict cycle, from prevention to long-term peacebuilding (EEAS, 2024). The 2017 New European Consensus on Development further recognised the importance of LRAs for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals and strengthening governance (Council of the European Union, 2017).

Institutional reforms since 2021 have also expanded both the scale and scope of EU external action. The creation of the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI-Global Europe) and the Team Europe³ approach aimed to pool EU and MS resources, combining grants, guarantees and blended finance (European Commission, n.d.b). Within this architecture, the Global Gateway strategy – with an estimated EUR 300 billion investment ambition until 2027 – prioritises connectivity, green transitions, digitalisation, education and health, and is articulated through six principles stressing democratic values, transparency, equal partnerships, sustainability, security and private-sector mobilisation (European Commission, n.d.c).

Yet several challenges hinder the EU's ability to operationalise its stated approach to fragility and the HDP nexus. The Global Gateway's investment-driven logic tends to rely on predictable regulatory and governance environments and, therefore, aligns more naturally with stable contexts and large-scale infrastructure initiatives, as some senior EU officials have acknowledged (Bilal, & Teevan, 2024; Bossuyt, & Sainaghi, 2025; Desmidt, et al., 2024). This is a significant limitation given that almost half of Global Gateway partner countries are among the most fragile worldwide (Bossuyt, & Sainaghi, 2025).

Moreover, PLATFORMA's 2024 position paper on NDICI-Global Europe and a more recent analysis by CIDOB highlight that, **despite political recognition of subnational actors and decentralised cooperation in Global Europe's regulatory framework, the modalities of support remain unclear** (Fernández de Losada, et al., 2023; Platforma, 2024). Reportedly, there is no guaranteed direct access to funding for LRAs and no dedicated funding line for decentralised

³ Team Europe, which consists of EU institutions, its member states, the European Investment Bank (EIB), and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), (European Commission, n.d.b).

cooperation, particularly since the removal of the previous dedicated LA-CSO budget line (Platforma, 2024). The 2021-2027 EU budget has been criticised on the grounds that cities, territories and decentralised cooperation seem no longer a priority in the implementation channels of EU external action (Fernández de Losada, et al., 2023).

At the same time, the share of EU Member States’ ODA directed to the most fragile contexts has been declining since 2020, and aid and HDP-related budgets have recently been reduced as attention has shifted towards security and defence spending (Chase-Lubitz, 2025; Fabre, & Spencer Bernard, 2025; EuroHealthNet, 2024; Rankin, 2025).

Against this backdrop, the Commission’s July 2025 communication on the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) (2028-2034) signals an intention to consolidate existing external action, development and humanitarian funding streams into a single “Global Europe” instrument (European Commission, 2025a). The communication also proposes increasing the overall budget to EUR 200 billion, up from EUR 92.3 billion. However, critics point to the wording of the proposal, highlighting that there is no guaranteed allocation for humanitarian assistance, but rather a political commitment of EUR 25 billion (Hauck, & Desmidt, 2025; VOICE, 2025). Allocations could be reduced during the MFF negotiations or fall below this level through annual budget decisions, and there are concerns over the transparency of what would be classified as humanitarian or development aid (Hauck, & Desmidt, 2025; VOICE, 2025). As the budget remains subject to negotiation, the final MFF package is currently expected to be agreed upon in December 2027 (Donor Tracker, 2025; European Commission, 2025a).

OECD analysis warns that rising donor risk aversion in extremely fragile contexts and a reduction in resources for HDP initiatives can lead to short-term, reactive assistance and a “low-risk, low-return” dynamic, with humanitarian funding growing while support for development and conflict prevention continues to shrink (OECD, 2025). The combination of an investment-focused strategy under Global Gateway, more limited and insecure financial channels for LRAs, and increasingly risk-averse engagement in the most fragile contexts, complicates the EU’s commitment to an integrated approach to fragility and long-term resilience-building. The broader implications of these trends for the EU’s geopolitical positioning and for competition with other external actors in fragile settings are explored in the last subsection of this chapter.

b) Overview of other actors' approaches

The geopolitical shifts surrounding the HDP nexus are increasingly shaped by a **retrenchment of Western donors' budgets and the reallocation of resources toward other investment instruments or defence expenditure**. As already mentioned, at the EU level, the share of ODA going to the most fragile contexts begun to decrease in 2020 (OECD, 2025). Germany and France have reported cuts to their ODA in recent budget cycles, and the UK is projected to reach its lowest ODA/GNI ratio on record by 2027 (Chase-Lubitz, 2025; EuroHealthNet, 2024; Fabre, & Spencer Bernard, 2025; Rankin, 2025). This mirrors broader trends highlighted in the OECD's 2025 States of Fragility report (OECD, 2025).

Reduced focus on peacebuilding and localisation within HDP initiatives has put a strain on global assistance efforts, which have been severely disrupted by cuts by the largest individual ODA donor, the US (USD 66 billion in 2023 alone) (OECD, 2024). The sudden termination of a large share of US' USAID operations in 2025 has generated major global disruptions, leaving critical gaps in health, humanitarian and conflict-prevention programmes and threatening millions of lives previously supported through long-term US development investments (Anderson, 2025; Kates, et al., 2025; U.S. Congress, 2025). These shifts create space for non-DAC and regional actors, whose roles in fragile settings have expanded significantly over the past decade but whose models differ substantially from the Western-promoted interpretations of the HDP nexus.

China's development engagement (generally channelled through state-to-state lending, infrastructure and productive-sector investment) has totalled USD 470 billion since 2008 and the country often remains active in fragile contexts where Western donors are reducing their presence (Mariani, 2022; Ray, et al., 2025; State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 2021). However, some analysts argue that China's and other regional actors' assistance do not replicate the functions traditionally fulfilled by Western ODA, as their main investments and instruments do not systematically fund global health, humanitarian response or conflict-prevention programmes (Puri, & O'Sullivan, 2025). China's approach, for example, prioritises "stability" and economic development rather than the liberal peacebuilding concepts embedded in the HDP nexus, following a concept of *development for peace* (Abb, 2024; Mariani, 2022). Some analysts question the success of this strategy in fragile contexts, as cases such as Pakistan and Myanmar illustrate the limits of its development-focused approach (Abb, 2024; Mariani, 2022). So far, large-scale infrastructure projects implemented by recipient central governments, with limited transparency and insufficient attention to local grievances, have not consistently reduced local tensions (Abb, 2024; Mariani, 2022).

Meanwhile, regional powers such as the Gulf states and Türkiye have increased their footprint in fragile contexts. Their modalities of aid and financing are more explicitly interest-driven, state-centric and tied to mutual-benefit narratives, rather than focused on HDP-style investments in local resilience, democracy promotion and conflict prevention (Desmidt, et al., 2024; Fabre, & Spencer Bernard, 2025; Puri, & O’Sullivan, 2025).

The combined effect is a reshaping of geopolitical relations in fragile contexts. As OECD analysis notes, fragility is increasingly instrumentalised by both state and non-state actors for political, security and economic influence (OECD, 2025). While some analyses suggest that non-Western actors are unlikely to fully supplant Western ODA (lacking either the resources or the intention to replicate the same types of programmes), others warn that when Western donors scale back long-term HDP engagement, partners in fragile contexts will turn to alternative sources of finance and political support (Puri, & O’Sullivan, 2025).

This would generate new alignments that may not advance democracy, stability or inclusive development. The Central Sahel illustrates this dynamic: as European actors scale back security and development cooperation, governments in the region deepen partnerships with China, Russia, Türkiye and the Gulf states (Desmidt, et al., 2024). Withdrawing from fragile contexts thus carries strategic costs: diminishing influence, raising the price of future re-engagement, and limiting opportunities to support governance, conflict prevention and the resilience of local institutions. **Analysts suggest that in a global context of competing development models, sustained engagement in fragile contexts is not only a development and humanitarian imperative but a geopolitical one** (Desmidt, et al., 2024; Fabre, & Spencer Bernard, 2025).

The next chapter, therefore, turns to the potential of LRAs and decentralised cooperation as tools for maintaining meaningful engagement and strengthening resilience in contexts where geopolitical competition and risk aversion increasingly shape international action.

2. The local dimensions of instability: decentralisation and local governance as the key to preventing fragility and instability

Fragility and instability are usually framed as national or regional issues, but they are experienced locally, with impacts ranging from communities without access to services, border towns cut off from trade, and municipalities unable to mediate tensions. As underlined in Chapter 1, recent work on fragility underlines this multi-level reality, where subnational governments have become central public investors and service providers, critical to multi-level governance and territorial cohesion.

This chapter argues that **decentralisation and local governance are not peripheral to preventing fragility; they are structural entry points for building stability, resilience and peace.** It draws on global frameworks (OECD, UNDP, World Bank), the evolving research and findings in the field of city diplomacy, as well as on the experience built around successful concrete initiatives, as showcased through the Nicosia Initiative and others described in the last part of this study (Chapter 5).

2.1. Fragility's local dimensions and the role of decentralisation

a) From national fragility to local risk and resilience

Recent global assessments converge on key points. First, fragility is expanding and increasingly “universal”, experienced more than ever before in middle-income and even high-income contexts (OECD, 2025), as noted in the previous chapter. This reflects rising risks and weakening resilience, as institutions are unable to absorb shocks such as conflict, climate or economic disruptions without spirals of violence or exclusion (OECD, 2025).

The second factor is rapid urbanisation and demographic change, which increasingly concentrates fragility dynamics in cities and border regions. **Global projections suggest that around 70% of the world's population may live in urban areas by 2050, increasing the pressure on employment, housing, water and basic services, and altering social cohesion and security dynamics – key issues measured by the OECD's fragility indicators – (OECD, 2025).** Moreover, in contexts affected by high and extreme fragility, the OECD notes that the **pace and form of urban growth can be destabilising, particularly where settlements are disconnected from basic services, presenting higher risks of**

violence and entrenchment of criminal governance. These pressures are compounded by mobility and forced displacement, as cities are often the first destination for people fleeing conflict, political instability or environmental stress, as reflected in the large share of refugees currently displaced in urban areas.

In this context, **decentralisation has a dual face in fragile settings. When it is accompanied by adequate resources, clear mandates and coherent multi-level coordination, it can bring the state closer to citizens, support territorial approaches to development and create channels for peaceful contestation** through local elections, participatory budgeting or neighbourhood councils, for example (WB, 2020; OECD, 2025). In such configurations, decentralisation can help address long-standing grievances linked to exclusion and territorial inequality and, thus, contribute to prevention.

However, **decentralisation can also generate or aggravate risks if reforms are poorly sequenced, under-funded or heavily politicised** (Prize, 2013). Instead of empowering citizens and broadening inclusion, decentralisation may entrench local elites and fuel competition over access to resources. Comparative experience in fragile and conflict-affected settings underlines that **decentralisation is never neutral**: it redistributes power and resources and, therefore, requires conflict-sensitive design and implementation.

The World Bank's Fragility, Conflict and Violence Strategy 2020-2025, for example, acknowledges this ambiguity but still calls for stronger and more systematic engagement with local institutions (WB, 2020). Through the strategy, the organisation emphasises that **local governments are essential partners to address structural drivers of fragility**, such as exclusion, lack of economic opportunity or deep territorial disparities. They are also key actors **to rebuild trust through visible improvements in basic services and local security at the community level.**

In practice, **many fragile states still suffer from a “missing middle” in their governance architecture** (OECD & UCLG, 2022). Central governments are often over-burdened, highly politicised and concentrated in capital cities. This combination tends to distort priorities toward short-term crisis management and politically salient investments, while leaving peripheral areas and secondary cities comparatively neglected. Decision-making, staffing and budgets cluster in the capital, creating administrative, political, and symbolic distance between the state and citizens outside the centre. In fragile settings, this concentration can deepen perceptions of exclusion and reduce the state's ability to anticipate and respond to local shocks before they escalate (WB, 2025).

At the same time, local governments are closest to citizens but often lack clear mandates, qualified staff and predictable financing. Municipalities remain the first interface for everyday services such as waste collection, water, public spaces, permits and dispute mediation; yet they often operate with ambiguous responsibilities that overlap with deconcentrated central services or security actors (UNDP, 2016). Without predictable intergovernmental transfers and viable own-source revenues, LRAs struggle to plan, maintain infrastructure and services, which undermines both performance and legitimacy in the eyes of communities.

Finally, UNDP's Local Governance in Fragile Settings framework further underlines that intermediate tiers (regions, provinces and similar levels) are frequently under-defined, under-resourced or bypassed. In many systems, these levels exist formally but lack a clear functional role as coordinators of municipal planning, service delivery and investment (UNDP, 2016). Their fiscal base is often thin, and they may be treated as political extensions of the centre rather than autonomous problem-solving institutions (World Bank, 2022). When they are bypassed by central ministries, donors, or parallel delivery units, opportunities for territorial coordination are lost, fragmentation increases, and municipalities remain isolated, especially in large or diverse territories.

OECD and United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) data on subnational governance and finance, as well as interviews conducted for the study, illustrate how this institutional gap constrains investment in resilience and territorial cohesion. Local risk and resilience, in contexts of national fragility, are therefore the two sides of the same coin: **decentralisation and local governance reforms, if designed with conflict sensitivity and backed by adequate support, can help fill this gap and anchor prevention strategies territorially rather than only at the national level** (OECD & UCLG, 2022). This aligns with United Nations Development Programme's emphasis on local institutions as the daily interface between state and society and a critical arena for restoring social cohesion and legitimacy, and with the World Bank's call to reinforce local governments and adequately fund frontline service delivery in fragile, conflict-affected and vulnerable settings (UNDP, 2016; WB, 2020).

b) Local governance, city diplomacy and peacebuilding

In the last decade, several initiatives and projects have highlighted municipalities as **actors in conflict prevention, dialogue and post-conflict reconstruction, not merely as implementers of higher-level decisions** (such as the Nicosia Initiative, UCLG Hague Agenda on City Diplomacy and subsequent UCLG Peace Prize publications).

These show how local governments, by virtue of their proximity to citizens and direct responsibility for services and public spaces, can mediate tensions around land, migration, identity or access to services in everyday governance. As many conflict drivers are experienced locally, **municipal administrations can act as “first responders” when they have the tools and legitimacy to do so.**

City diplomacy does not replace national diplomacy, nor does it challenge national authority. Rather, it provides pragmatic, complementary channels that allow municipalities to function and innovate under constrained circumstances (UNDP, 2016).

In this context, city mediation may take the form of convening local stakeholders, facilitating negotiated solutions, ensuring transparent administrative decisions and establishing accessible grievance channels. When handled inclusively, these everyday interventions can prevent disputes from escalating into violence and strengthen confidence in institutional mechanisms for dispute resolution rather than coercion.

Drawing on the responses from several municipal networks, it can be noted that LRAs can also facilitate cross-border dialogue and cooperation, for example, through twinning arrangements or metropolitan partnerships. Municipalities in border and migration corridors often share practical challenges (mobility, trade, public health, water management, environmental risks) that require coordination regardless of national political tensions. City-to-city relationships can create stable channels for communication, technical exchange, and joint initiatives that reduce misperceptions and enable pragmatic agreements. Over time, such cooperation can build trust incrementally, making it possible to manage sensitive issues such as cross-border markets or shared resources, through predictable routines rather than ad-hoc crisis responses.

In addition, municipalities can also use cultural, educational and youth policies to promote a “culture of peace” and non-violence at the community level. Municipal leadership can shape the social environment in which young people and communities form identities, interpret grievances and decide how to act. By investing in inclusive cultural programming, civic education, youth participation platforms, sports and arts initiatives, and community dialogue, cities can strengthen social cohesion and create alternatives to polarisation. These “soft” policies are not peripheral; they can be central to prevention, especially in rapidly urbanising contexts where demographic pressure and marginalisation heighten the risk of unrest.

These concepts have been confirmed and enriched by practice. Documentation linked to the 2021 UCLG Peace Prize presents cases in which municipal action on inclusive service delivery, youth participation and structured local dialogue has reduced local violence, improved relations between communities and increased citizens' trust in public institutions (Justino, 2017). The cases illustrate municipal leaders and administrations engaging in mediation, convening diverse actors and using their convening power to open channels of communication where national politics are blocked.

At the same time, **recent policy debates⁴ on professionalising city diplomacy, stress the need for clearer mandates, dedicated teams, and better integration of international work with core municipal functions such as spatial planning, finance, social services and crisis management.** This institutionalisation is particularly relevant to fragility prevention: it helps ensure that city diplomacy is not an ad-hoc add-on, but a structured instrument aligned with the city's long-term development strategy and its role in multi-level governance.⁵

In short, **local governance and city diplomacy are increasingly recognised as complementary tools.** Local governance focuses on how cities are managed internally – institutions, services, participation – while city diplomacy shapes how they act externally through partnerships and international action. Both dimensions influence local resilience and stability.

c) **Barriers that keep LRAs at the margins**

Evidence from fieldwork and the subsequent interviews, supported by the academic literature, reinforces and nuances these assessments, pointing to several obstacles that keep LRAs at the margins of engagement in fragile contexts.

- Access to funding is frequently restricted by decisions at the central-government level; very few instruments are designed with LRAs as direct contracting partners, even when policy documents recognise their importance. In practice, this means that municipalities may be expected to deliver results on the ground while remaining dependent on national gatekeepers for approvals, transfers and access to external resources. This not only limits local initiative but can also fuel perceptions of exclusion and deepen territorial grievances.
- Procedures, financial thresholds and co-financing requirements are also often unrealistic for small and medium-sized municipalities, especially in

⁴ During the preparation of this study, two major conferences took place: the [“Cities and Regions for International Partnerships” Forum](#) (8–10 December 2025, Brussels), and [the Mediterranean Cities Conference](#) (26-27 November 2025, Barcelona), where debates underlined these findings.

⁵ Ibidem.

fragile settings marked by instability and weak revenue bases. Many municipalities cannot meet procurement standards, reporting requirements, or financial management thresholds without substantial support, and co-financing rules can exclude precisely the areas most in need. The result is a *de facto* reliance on intermediaries – NGOs, UN agencies, large consultancies, and central agencies, among others – who can manage compliance but may weaken municipal leadership and reduce the visibility of local institutions as drivers of change.

Despite updated policies and strategies to engage with municipalities, practice on the ground remains uneven, with donors rarely interacting with LRAs or their associations. This can lead to programming designed with an incomplete understanding of local political economy, capacity constraints, or community dynamics. It also deprives donors of a critical source of contextual intelligence and reduces opportunities for long-term accompaniment, peer learning, and trust-building between external partners and local institutions.

In their current form, mechanisms are therefore often perceived as “unrealistic” for fragile territories, as underlined in most exchanges with practitioners working in the field. Risk frameworks, scale and time horizons do not allow for the flexibility, incremental approaches and risk-sharing that fragile local contexts require. In volatile environments, municipalities need room to adapt activities, re-sequence priorities and learn by doing, yet many instruments are built around rigid timelines and compliance-heavy processes. When instruments cannot absorb uncertainty, they can inadvertently penalise local partners for the very instability that the intervention seeks to address.

Small, flexible and rapidly accessible funding instruments alongside larger, long-term programmes should be prioritised, with reasonable security and mobility guarantees for technical staff and project implementation, and flexibility in project management to adapt to changing circumstances without loss of funding.

In this context, networks and associations of local authorities emerge as critical intermediaries. They can aggregate demand from their members, provide technical support and fiduciary safeguards, and act as a form of political and institutional “guarantee” that makes engagement with fragile territories more feasible and less risky.

ECDPM case studies on the *Association Internationale des Maires Francophones* (AIMF) and other city-to-city partnerships illustrate how such networks connect EU priorities with local realities, especially where direct bilateral relations between donors – notably the EU, and individual municipalities – are challenging (Bossuyt, & Sainaghi, 2025).

2.2. Cooperation formats that work in fragile contexts

a) No single model: flexibility as a cornerstone of subnational diplomacy

Insights point to a clear lesson: there is no single dominant model of decentralised cooperation in fragile contexts. Rather, a variety of formats coexist and can be effective when tailored to local needs and constraints.

Interviewees suggest that:

- **South-South peer-to-peer exchanges** are often prioritised between municipalities facing similar governance and security challenges. **Their value lies in practical problem-solving among peers who work under comparable constraints, which makes lessons more transferable than those drawn from very different administrative systems.** These exchanges tend to work best when they allow partners to set agendas jointly, adjust activities as conditions evolve, and focus on improvements in municipal functions such as planning, service delivery, communication and local mediation. Flexibility in financing and timelines is therefore not a convenience but a success factor, enabling cooperation to remain relevant amid changes in the security and political context.
- **Diaspora-related cooperation** plays an important role in countries experiencing fragile contexts, as diasporas mobilise resources for territorial development and job creation. **Diaspora initiatives can inject capital, technical skills and social commitment into local development, often targeting visible community priorities and economic opportunities.** However, without structured links to municipal strategies, these contributions can remain fragmented or uneven across neighbourhoods and sectors. When municipalities provide clear investment priorities, channels for engagement and mechanisms for accountability, diaspora contributions can be aligned with local plans, scaled more effectively, and integrated into broader efforts to strengthen services and livelihoods.
- **Triangular models** link cities with regional hubs or municipal networks, which in turn support smaller and more fragile municipalities. These models respond to the reality that fragile municipalities may lack the administrative capacity to manage complex partnerships or donor procedures independently. **By working through a hub – often a stronger city, a territorial entity, or an association – support can be pooled, technical assistance can be shared, and fiduciary responsibilities can be managed more efficiently.** This structure also spreads risk and reduces isolation, helping smaller municipalities access expertise and solidarity while retaining ownership over locally defined priorities.

Across these formats, a crucial element is the politically neutral posture adopted by networks of cities or LRAs. By maintaining neutrality and focusing on municipal mandates rather than party politics, they are able to build trust with cities across political divides and sustain cooperation even when national-level relations are tense or diplomatic channels are strained.

Exchanges with policymakers and development actors working in these contexts suggest that, in practical terms, decentralised cooperation can support municipalities in operationalising mandates through training and systems-building, turning legal competences into functioning routines for planning, budgeting, procurement, and service management. This helps close the gap between formal decentralisation and lived governance, reducing frustration among citizens who hear promises of local empowerment but do not experience improved service delivery and governance performance.

The same exchanges also demonstrate how territorial cooperation helps create horizontal networks among municipalities that reduce isolation, foster peer learning and help diffuse innovations across territories. Horizontal networks provide channels for cities to share tools, adapt solutions and learn from comparable contexts without reinventing processes from scratch. In fragile environments, where capacity is uneven and shocks are frequent, peer connections can act as informal safety nets, allowing municipalities to access advice quickly, coordinate responses, and spread proven approaches, for example, on community dialogue, crisis communication, or service delivery under constraint.

b) Designing support: principles, instruments, monitoring and evaluation

As reflected in ECDPM's findings, several design principles appear to be effective for working with LRAs in fragile settings (Bossuyt, & Sainaghi, 2025). These principles point towards cooperation that is genuinely locally led, demand-driven and politically neutral.

LRAs approach donors and networks with their needs and contextual analysis; support is then tailored accordingly rather than imposed through generic calls for proposals. In fragile settings, as underlined by several development actors who contributed to this study, this demand-driven approach is essential because priorities can differ from one locality to another and can shift rapidly as shocks occur.

Indeed, local-to-local cooperation includes local associations and citizens – actors who are embedded in their territories and connected to the local context. Problem analysis must therefore start from the territory itself.

When municipalities define problems and propose solutions grounded in local context and risk analysis, cooperation is more likely to be feasible, conflict-sensitive, and aligned with what communities actually experience. It also strengthens accountability by making municipalities the primary authors of priorities rather than passive recipients of externally defined agendas.

From the design phase onwards, it should be clear who will operate and maintain infrastructure and services, and under what financial and institutional conditions. Ownership here means more than consultation; it requires explicit arrangements for staffing, recurrent costs, institutional responsibilities and oversight mechanisms. In fragile contexts, where projects often fail at the maintenance stage, clarifying operational responsibility early reduces the risk of “orphan infrastructure” and service collapse. It also supports legitimacy, as citizens can see that local institutions are not only hosting projects but are capable of sustaining them.

Frameworks and mechanisms should be non-partisan, focusing on municipal mandates and service delivery rather than partisan politics, and should seek to include different local actors in dialogue and decision-making. Neutrality reduces the risk that cooperation becomes captured by factions or interpreted as taking sides, which can be dangerous in contested environments. Inclusiveness ensures that benefits and decision-making are not monopolised by dominant groups, and that marginalised communities have channels to voice priorities. Together, neutrality and inclusiveness help cooperation contribute to social cohesion rather than inadvertently reinforcing exclusion.

Moreover, interview evidence further suggests that effective local engagement cannot depend solely on the presence of formal civil society organisations. Communities in fragile contexts typically rely on informal forms of organisation and locally recognised referents to mediate disputes and coordinate collective action. While such actors may not align fully with donors’ preferred profiles, they are accepted locally and can constitute practical entry points for cooperation. **In such contexts, inclusiveness is best pursued through a sequenced approach: initiating engagement through locally legitimate structures, while progressively strengthening safeguards for participation and representation** (including women, young people and marginalised groups) and avoiding repeated reliance on the same visible intermediaries. Initially addressing local divisions was underlined as a key factor in shaping whether external support was perceived as legitimate and effective.

Finally, the **strategic use of city networks, associations and communities of practice is key.** Networks and associations of local authorities can be used as

intermediaries that know the terrain, can pool smaller municipalities, provide technical support and share risks with donors. **These intermediaries can translate donor requirements into realistic municipal processes, provide coaching and peer learning, and create economies of scale for training and procurement support.** They can also provide continuity when individual municipalities face turnover or disruption, and they can help shield cooperation from politicisation by anchoring it in professional, mandate-based municipal collaboration.

In addition, communities of practice are particularly beneficial in contexts where any form of municipal association can be perceived as a threat to the central authorities, as they can more easily play an intermediary role, seen as more technical than political and therefore allowed.

These principles resonate strongly with UNDP and WB guidance on operating in fragile contexts, which likewise emphasise context-specific theories of change, inclusive governance, conflict sensitivity and long-term accompaniment rather than short, fragmented interventions (UNDP, 2016; WB, 2020).

The evidence and examples presented in this chapter point to a central conclusion: the local dimensions of fragility cannot be addressed without serious, sustained investment in decentralisation and local governance: (i) global analyses of fragility now explicitly acknowledge the importance of territorial disparities, urban vulnerabilities and local institutions in driving or mitigating risk; (ii) city diplomacy has matured from a niche practice to a core modality through which municipalities address conflict, migration and climate risks, often filling gaps left by national diplomacy or traditional development cooperation; (iii) EU frameworks such as Global Gateway and the Pact for the Mediterranean increasingly recognise cities and regions as strategic partners, but instruments and risk frameworks still lag behind this ambition and need to be adapted (European Commission, 2025b); (iv) concrete experiences show that decentralised cooperation can strengthen local legitimacy, support cross-border peace and provide one of the few remaining avenues for constructive engagement in highly fragile settings.

For the EU and other international partners, the implication is therefore clear: preventing fragility and instability requires “going local”, politically, institutionally and financially. Only by working through (and with) local governance systems can the EU move from managing recurrent crises to building the resilient, legitimate institutions that underpin long-term peace and stability.

3. Decentralised cooperation and city/subnational diplomacy as key tools to maintain EU engagement in fragile settings

As outlined in the introduction, the EU increasingly faces situations where traditional state-to-state engagement is significantly constrained by political instability, weak governance, conflict or the absence of legitimate national authorities. As already described, this dynamic is well-documented in the literature by the OECD, UNDP, and the WB, and has led to an expanding consensus that LRAs can serve as crucial stabilising actors, even where national governance is weakened or collapses (OECD, 2025; UNDP, 2016; WB, 2020).

Against this backdrop, **decentralised cooperation and city or subnational diplomacy have emerged as two key modalities through which the EU can sustain engagement in fragile contexts despite political volatility at the national level.** Whereas traditional foreign and development policy instruments primarily target state institutions, subnational diplomacy operates below the state level, using technical cooperation, municipal peer-to-peer partnerships, and subnational diplomatic channels to maintain dialogue, support essential service delivery, and strengthen local resilience.

The EU Integrated Approach to External Conflicts and Crises recognises the importance of multi-level governance and local engagement, but decentralised cooperation is not yet fully integrated into the design of EU external action (EEAS, 2024). However, growing evidence, including the recent ECDPM discussion paper on the role of cities in fragile settings, indicates that local authorities can support peacebuilding, decentralisation, stabilisation and early recovery in ways that national authorities cannot or may not (Bossuyt, & Sainaghi, 2025).

This chapter consolidates the available analysis from the EU, OECD, UN and academic literature, and demonstrates that **subnational diplomacy should be considered an essential component of the EU's toolbox for fragile settings, both as operational and political instruments.** At the same time, the strategic choice to rely on LRAs is not merely operational, it also has political implications. **Engaging local authorities can recalibrate power relations within fragile states, potentially empowering actors that central governments perceive as competitors.** Recognising this political economy dimension is essential when designing EU engagement.

3.1 Evolution of decentralised cooperation as an operational tool for EU engagement in fragile settings

Since the late 1990s, the EU has progressively recognised LRAs as autonomous actors in development cooperation. The Cotonou Agreement explicitly acknowledged LRAs as “key stakeholders” in international cooperation (Djigo, & Wright, 2019), a stance then reinforced under the EU thematic programmes for subnational actors (Urban Agenda for the EU, n.d.). Currently, NDICI-Global Europe further positions LRAs as essential partners in delivering the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially under the “Partnerships for Sustainable Cities” programme (European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2021).

European networks such as PLATFORMA, UCLG, AIMF, the Commonwealth Local Government Forum (CLGF) and the Association of Local Democracy Agencies (ALDA) have played critical roles in such an institutionalisation of decentralised cooperation within EU external policy. These networks coordinate decentralised initiatives, provide political representation for LRAs and act as intermediaries between the EU institutions and cities worldwide. The added value of their work, especially in fragile and conflict-affected settings can be summarised as follows:

a) Local legitimacy and proximity

The OECD identifies LRAs among the most trusted arms of government in fragile settings, largely because they are “part of” local communities and hence can deliver tangible services (water, waste management, mobility, registry services) (OECD, 2025). This allows for bypassing political or institutional blockages at the national level while avoiding the fragmentation risks associated with purely community-based approaches. As a result, subnational diplomacy occupies a unique “intermediate governance space” that is increasingly relevant in crisis situations.

b) Technical, peer-to-peer cooperation

Unlike state-level development programmes, **decentralised cooperation is structured around technical exchanges (peer learning, joint problem-solving, secondments), which reduces political sensitivity**. This makes it effective even where central governments reject or obstruct external engagement, such as in contested municipalities in Libya, in the Great Lakes region, in the Sahel or again in Ukrainian municipalities under martial law. As the Nicosia Initiative illustrates

in Libya, technical cooperation can serve as a vehicle for **maintaining and strengthening long-term political engagement**.

c) Continuity of basic public services

Municipal-level service delivery is essential in preventing further fragility. World Bank research highlights that service continuity during crises reduces displacement, supports economic activity and strengthens social contracts (WB, 2020). **Decentralised cooperation interventions often directly target service systems that are most vulnerable during conflict (waste, water, transport, administrative services) and these interventions generate visible and immediate “peace dividends”** (McCandless, 2012).

d) Resilience building and early recovery

UNDP’s Local Governance in Fragile Settings (2016) framework stresses that municipal governance is central to stabilisation and recovery, often more so than national institutions. Decentralised cooperation directly invests in local capacities such as financial management, urban planning, crisis response, and digital administration.

Despite the significant evolution of decentralised cooperation in the EU’s external agenda and its above-mentioned strengths, it also carries significant risks. First, there is a risk of “local elite capture”: academic literature warns that local powerful elites can co-opt external assistance, reinforcing exclusion or corruption (U4 Anti-Corruption Resource Centre, n.d.). Second, insufficient coordination can lead to fragmentation without alignment with EU Delegations and EEAS, decentralised cooperation initiatives risk duplication, overlap or inconsistency with broader EU foreign policy. Third, security constraints can hinder delivery and effectiveness, as city-to-city cooperation in conflict zones often faces logistical, security and insurance barriers. Finally, municipalities in fragile contexts have unequal capacities: some may lack the administrative capacity to absorb assistance, increasing the likelihood of project failure or dependency. To mitigate these challenges, empirical studies recommend establishing minimum governance standards, strengthening municipal procurement and financial management systems, among other measures.

3.2 City and subnational diplomacy as a complementary political tool in fragile settings

Subnational diplomacy, also referred to as city diplomacy, paradiplomacy or translocal diplomacy, describes international cooperation conducted by subnational governments (cities, regions, provinces) to advance political, economic, cultural or development objectives. Key conceptual definitions are provided by UCLG (Gold, n.d.) and academic work by Acuto (2013), Curtis and Barber (2013), among others. **Recent scholarship underlines that subnational diplomacy can function as a form of “networked diplomacy”, in which cities leverage transnational municipal networks to collectively influence international agendas.** This collective action dimension becomes particularly important in fragile contexts where individual municipalities may lack political weight (Acuto, 2013; Barber, 2013). Traditionally associated with climate action and economic promotion, subnational diplomacy has also increasingly taken on a geopolitical dimension, through several mechanisms:

a) Dialogue and peace mediation

Cities can maintain diplomatic channels even when national governments sever relations. This form of “pragmatic diplomacy” has been documented in Libya.

b) Advocacy and representation

Cities can amplify the voices of conflict-affected territories in international forums such as UN-Habitat’s World Urban Forum, UCLG World Congress, ARLEM, CORLEAP.

c) Humanitarian and solidarity diplomacy

Subnational actors mobilise emergency aid faster than national governments, as illustrated by the vast European municipal support to Ukraine since 2022 (Szpak, et al., 2023).

Digital platforms and virtual cooperation mechanisms have further expanded the reach of subnational diplomacy. During the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine, cities increasingly relied on online peer-learning, remote capacity support and virtual diplomatic events, reducing access barriers for conflict-affected municipalities.

3.3 Integrating decentralised cooperation and subnational diplomacy into the EU's toolbox for fragile settings

The growing relevance of decentralised cooperation and subnational diplomacy in fragile contexts indicates the need for more systematic integration into EU external action. While the EU's Integrated Approach recognises the importance of multi-level governance, current operational frameworks still rely predominantly on national-level engagement and large-scale programmes that assume stable central institutions. Such an assumption is often incompatible with the political realities of fragile settings – where national authorities may be contested, absent or unwilling to cooperate – while LRAs remain the primary providers of essential services and among the most trusted public actors.

A central barrier to the full deployment of decentralised cooperation and subnational diplomacy within EU external action in fragile settings is the structural design of existing strategies and instruments, including the Global Gateway (European Commission, n.d.a). Its emphasis on national partnerships and major infrastructure investments limits its applicability in fragile environments, where political volatility undermines national capacity to engage in long-term commitments.

A further barrier is **the rigidity of current EU financing instruments, which often rely on long planning cycles and risk-averse compliance procedures**. Consequently, EU engagement becomes constrained precisely in those contexts where local partnerships might offer stable opportunities. Another limitation stems from the uneven institutional anchoring of LRAs across EU Delegations and programming processes. Although municipalities and regions are often closer to conflict-affected communities and possess detailed knowledge of local dynamics, their involvement in EU analysis, programming and implementation remains ad-hoc.

These constraints reduce the ability of LRAs to access funding directly and limit the EU's capacity to support rapid municipal interventions in volatile contexts. More flexible, small-scale and rapidly accessible funds could significantly enhance impact in fragile settings.

Integrating decentralised cooperation and subnational diplomacy into the EU's toolbox would therefore **require both institutional adjustments and clear operational models**. One promising avenue could be the adoption of a **“localised integrated approach/programming”**, which builds on the EU's Integrated

Approach but complements it with systematic engagement of local authorities (Danish Refugee Council, 2025).

Under such a framework, decentralised cooperation would function as an operational mechanism for stabilisation and resilience-building, enabling EU partners to sustain service delivery, strengthen municipal institutions and support local recovery when national-level cooperation is constrained. This aligns with the EU's commitments under the HDP nexus, the Localisation Agenda, and the Council Conclusions on strengthening the EU's resilience approach. It would provide a more coherent framework for linking the strengthening of local governance with conflict prevention, stabilisation and early recovery. Subnational diplomacy would complement this by providing political channels for dialogue, confidence-building and conflict mitigation, especially in contexts where formal diplomatic engagement encounters obstacles.

Practical experience from the EU and international organisations provides a set of models that illustrate how this localised approach could function in practice. Peer-to-peer stabilisation partnerships, exemplified by the Nicosia Initiative in Libya, show that long-term institutional cooperation between LRAs can generate improvements in public administration, service continuity and crisis response, while also establishing political bridges in fragmented environments (see Chapters 4 and 5). Similarly, translocal networks for resilience, such as those supported by UNDRR, ICLEI and the Resilient Cities Network, demonstrate how cities can address the pressures of fragility, whether related to climate risks, displacement or violence. These networks enable knowledge transfer, joint problem-solving and coordinated planning across municipalities facing similar vulnerabilities.

Another operational model draws on local governance recovery frameworks, developed through UNDP and World Bank practice in countries such as Iraq and Ukraine. These frameworks prioritise rapid local assessments, municipal recovery planning and participatory decision-making as the foundation for national reconstruction efforts (UNDP, 2017). They align well with the EU's commitments to localisation and could serve as templates for EU-funded municipal cooperation in fragile environments. Finally, mainstreaming conflict sensitivity across all decentralised cooperation and subnational diplomacy interventions is essential to mitigate risks of reinforcing local inequalities and conflict. Conflict-sensitive cooperation, grounded in region-specific analysis, ensures that municipal partnerships contribute to social cohesion rather than deepen divisions.

Ensuring downward accountability is also critical. For example, cooperation between the Flemish government and Libyan municipalities in the framework of

the Nicosia Initiative – and with the technical support of Transparency International – led to the development of a set of procedures which have been subsequently adopted at the central level by the Libyan Ministry of Local Government. **Strengthening municipal transparency, participatory budgeting and citizen feedback mechanisms can enhance the legitimacy of EU-supported interventions, reinforce social contracts at the local level and reduce the risk of politicisation.** International evidence shows that accountability at the local level is often more direct and meaningful than at the national level, particularly in fragile contexts.

Integrating these models and principles into EU external action would enhance the EU's capacity to operate in fragile settings by expanding its operational reach beyond national institutions. Yet, this integration would need formalised mechanisms within EU Delegations to engage LRAs, dedicated and more flexible funding streams capable of supporting municipal partnerships in high-risk environments, and clearer recognition of subnational diplomacy as a complementary component of EU diplomacy. **By embedding decentralised cooperation and subnational diplomacy within its toolbox and building on experiences from the Nicosia Initiative, the EU could further strengthen its ability to sustain meaningful engagement in fragile contexts, support local resilience and contribute to more legitimate and context-sensitive approaches to stability.**

4. Lessons learnt from the Nicosia Initiative on decentralised cooperation between Libya and the EU

Since 2011, Libya has experienced a protracted political crisis marked by armed conflict, political division, fragmentation and instability. In this context, the Nicosia Initiative represents one of the most sustained and structured examples of decentralised cooperation between the EU and a fragile partner country. Launched in January 2016 at ARLEM's annual plenary meeting in Nicosia under the auspices of the CoR, the Initiative provides a platform through which European LRAs engage with Libyan municipalities to advance institutional development, basic service delivery and multi-level governance (European Committee of the Regions, n.d.b). The Initiative's primary objective is to improve the living conditions of Libyan citizens. To this end, it aims to **support Libyan municipalities in stabilising the country by improving public service provision and strengthening administrative capacity at a local level** (European Committee of the Regions, 2021).

The initiative also strives to help the Libyan local authorities overcome isolation and engage with the international community by facilitating partnerships with their European counterparts (Rebuild, 2022). It operates based on a **bottom-up approach, focusing on the most urgent needs identified by Libyan municipalities** (European Committee of the Regions, 2021). Through this undertaking, the EC primarily provides financial support, while EU cities and regions share good practices and expertise in areas such as waste management (Antwerp), water management (Murcia), and public administration (Nicosia) (EU Neighbours South, 2019; European Committee of the Regions, n.d.b; Fitzgerald, 2018).

Between 2016 and 2021, **more than 500 Libyan municipal officials from all regions of the country participated in 35 study visits, meetings and training activities**. The Nicosia Initiative was further structured in 2021 through the launch of two EU-funded projects: Towards A New Multi-level Shared Approach for Libya Local Governance (TAMSALL; concluded in 2024) and Research and Education Building Urban Institutions for Local Development (REBUILD; concluded in 2025) (see more in section 4.2) (European Committee of the Regions, 2021 & 2024; Rebuild, n.d.a).

The Nicosia Initiative's relevance lies not only in the breadth of participating municipalities but also in **its ability to maintain operational continuity throughout years of political fragmentation in Libya**. The experience gathered

through the Initiative, including its subsequent EU-funded projects, offers a substantial basis for understanding the enabling conditions, opportunities and limitations of decentralised cooperation in fragile environments. The lessons observed to date relate to: 1) institutional design and facilitation; 2) approaches to local capacity strengthening; 3) subnational diplomacy and trust-building; and 4) sustainability and the importance of local ownership. These lessons are drawn not only from project documentation but also from in-depth interviews with EU officials, implementing partners and Libyan municipal representatives, allowing for a more practice-oriented assessment of what has worked, why and under what constraints.

4.1 Institutional design and facilitation: the CoR as intermediary

A central lesson from the Nicosia Initiative is the **value of a dedicated intermediary institution capable of providing political legitimacy, continuity and coordination**. The CoR fulfilled this function not only as a political coordinating authority but also as the formal secretariat of the Initiative, responsible for managing day-to-day coordination, facilitating communication among partners and upholding neutrality across Libya's divided political landscape (Rebuild, n.d.a). As the CoR represents the LRAs in the EU and engages directly with LRAs in partner countries, it can operate without requiring constant engagement with national governments. Thus, it served as a foundation for building a platform where the municipalities from opposing sides could meet on neutral ground to discuss cooperation for the benefit of their local populations.

This secretariat role was crucial in ensuring that the Initiative functioned as a stable, depoliticised framework for technical cooperation with municipalities from all regions of Libya, irrespective of shifting national-level alliances. By mobilising a network of European LRAs with relevant expertise, the CoR has prevented decentralised cooperation from becoming fragmented across isolated city-to-city interventions, instead mainstreaming it in a coherent multi-level governance framework. The CoR's intermediary function thus provided an institutional "buffer" between national-level volatility and municipal-level cooperation. **This arrangement allowed decentralised cooperation to continue even during periods of political paralysis, strengthened the legitimacy of Libyan municipalities as governance actors, and ensured that cooperation was shielded from fluctuations in national politics.** Interview evidence highlights that the perceived "distance" of the CoR from central executive power was not a weakness but an asset. Libyan and EU interlocutors repeatedly underlined that cooperation led by an institution detached from national political rivalries reduced suspicion, lowered bureaucratic barriers and

allowed engagement to remain primarily technical rather than political (which then created space for dialogue with political engagement too). This intermediary positioning also enabled continuity during periods when state-level cooperation was blocked or excessively sensitive, to some extent helping to insulate municipal-level engagement from national-level volatility.

4.2 Approaches to local capacity strengthening through peer-to-peer cooperation

The Nicosia Initiative demonstrates how peer-to-peer cooperation can be an effective model for strengthening municipal governance in fragile contexts. **Rather than relying on standardised technical assistance, it is based on direct exchanges between European and Libyan LRAs, allowing practical knowledge to be adapted to Libya’s administrative, legal and political realities.**

This cooperation model offers several advantages, such as:

- **Context sensitivity:** European LRAs can tailor administrative, planning and service delivery models to local constraints and capacities.
- **Flexibility:** activities can be adjusted in response to evolving political or security dynamics without jeopardising overall project continuity.
- **Institutional strengthening:** local administrations gain exposure to functioning European local administrations, facilitating the development of practical skills in areas such as territorial planning, waste and water services, digitalisation, and administrative management (Nierdorf, 2021).

Within this broader framework, EU-funded projects such as TAMSALL and REBUILD illustrate how peer-to-peer approaches have been operationalised. While TAMSALL has supported the co-design of municipal service delivery models and multi-level governance arrangements with Libyan municipalities and the Libyan Ministry of Local Government REBUILD has institutionalised capacity-building by developing a training-of-trainers methodology with Libyan LRAs and universities, among other actors, aiming to create a sustainable domestic system for municipal training (Rebuild, n.d.b). In addition to the EU-funded projects, there were also other actions supported by EU LRAs, such as a project funded by the government of Flanders which aimed at developing anti-corruption practices within Libyan local authorities (European Committee of the Regions, n.d.b; Transparency International Belgium, 2023).

Interviewees consistently stressed that the **added value of peer-to-peer cooperation laid less in the transfer of “best practices” and more in mutual problem-solving among practitioners facing comparable constraints.**

Exchanges between municipalities operating under fragility, rather than idealised examples from stable contexts, were perceived as more credible, empowering and actionable. This helped avoid dependency-oriented dynamics and reinforced professional confidence among Libyan municipal staff.

4.3 Subnational diplomacy and the creation of safe political space

Beyond its technical dimension, the Initiative demonstrates the diplomatic potential of decentralised cooperation in fragile settings. Engagement with Libyan municipalities has functioned as a form of subnational diplomacy, producing political effects that extend beyond capacity-building outcomes. Three features stand out:

1. **International access and recognition:** Libyan municipal leaders gained structured exposure to European peers and EU institutions, contributing to increased legitimacy and visibility.
2. **Enabling cooperation across conflict lines:** by convening municipalities from different political and geographical backgrounds, the Initiative offered a neutral platform for dialogue and cooperation where national reconciliation remained stalled.
3. **Complementarity with EU foreign policy:** the Nicosia Initiative enabled the EU to maintain engagement in Libya during periods when formal state-level channels were constrained, thereby broadening the range of diplomatic entry points.

The joint participation of mayors from Tripoli, Benghazi, Tobruk, Sebha and other municipalities in activities under TAMSALL and REBUILD projects demonstrated how technical cooperation could facilitate interaction across conflict lines. This “safe political space” was not a substitute for national reconciliation, but it contributed to the preservation of communication channels and the reduction of isolation among local governance actors (Rebuild, 2022).

Interview material highlights that this process often required deliberate facilitation and extended trust-building. Early engagement was described as emotionally charged and politically sensitive, with some participants initially reluctant to sit at the same table. Over time, however, **structured dialogue centred on concrete service delivery challenges helped shift attention from conflict narratives towards shared responsibilities to citizens.** This dynamic underscores the diplomatic function of subnational diplomacy as a confidence-preserving mechanism rather than a substitute for national reconciliation processes.

4.4 Sustainability and the importance of local ownership

A recurring lesson across all components of the Nicosia Initiative is that local ownership is essential to the Initiative’s sustainability, from the initial identification of cooperation priorities to the implementation of pilot actions (UNSMIL, 2018). LRAs have consistently shaped the thematic focus of cooperation, ensuring alignment with locally identified needs, institutional constraints and political considerations. Support to Libyan universities under the REBUILD project demonstrates an effort to root capacity-building within domestic institutions rather than relying exclusively on external actors, strengthening both sustainability and neutrality. That is because universities are fully decentralised in the Libyan territory, allowing also to extend capacity-building to remote areas often excluded from activities concentrated in main cities. **Local ownership has also helped sustain cooperation despite political turbulence.** Municipal demand for support has remained high, providing continuity to the Initiative even during episodes of heightened national instability.

At the same time, implementation has required close attention to conflict sensitivity and has emphasised the importance of recognising existing potential and resources. The Initiative has built on having established networks of contacts with key stakeholders across Libya and its political divides, some of which predated the conflict. In particular, interviewees emphasised the role of the “focal point”, who was present on the ground and whose contextual knowledge and trusted relationships with relevant stakeholders helped sustain access and communication across divided municipal actors.

These assets enabled the Initiative to operate across municipalities aligned with different political factions, while requiring careful analysis of local power dynamics, inclusiveness and the risk of exacerbating local inequalities. Interviewees also emphasised that such sustained presence and relational continuity were critical to maintaining trust. Several actors stressed that **not withdrawing during periods of deterioration, including through continued dialogue, project extensions and low-intensity engagement, was often more important than launching new activities.** This long-term relational approach helped mitigate risks associated with political fragmentation and reinforced the perception of the EU as a reliable partner at the local level.

4.5 Key takeaways and limitations

The experience of the Nicosia Initiative also highlights several structural challenges shaping the potential and limits of decentralised cooperation in fragile settings. In Libya, incomplete decentralisation constrains municipal autonomy,

political fragmentation disrupts continuity, security volatility affects implementation, and limited monitoring and evaluation mechanisms complicate impact assessment, particularly at the regional level (Bossuyt, 2024; United Nations, 2025). Additionally, the difficulty in raising sufficient and predictable funding has endangered continuity of action and the consolidation of some decentralised mechanisms. The Initiative relied on the capacity and commitment of individual regions. Gradually, however, some European partners withdrew due to a lack of longer-term financial support. In general, commitment on the European side was more fragile and closely linked to the political mandates and availability of funding. Moreover, coordination of work on the ground relied heavily on the focal point in Libya. Although support from the EC could have mitigated some of these issues, some interviewees perceived it as insufficient. This posed a risk and could have undermined the Initiative.

At the same time, the Initiative provides a set of preliminary but insightful lessons for EU engagement in fragile contexts. **Its model, rooted in multi-level governance, facilitated by an intermediary institution, and grounded in peer-to-peer cooperation, demonstrates that decentralised cooperation can remain operational, politically meaningful, and locally legitimate even in highly unstable environments.** These dynamics were explicitly discussed and showcased during the 9th Forum “*Cities and Regions for International Partnerships*”, held in Brussels in December 2025. The forum was dedicated to the contribution of LRAs to the EU’s Global Gateway strategy, including in fragile contexts. In this context, the selection of the Zliten **fish processing project** as a best practice for private sector engagement illustrates the Initiative’s success in going beyond fragility-focused interventions, and paving the way for locally anchored private sector engagement.

These findings should nevertheless be treated with caution. Interviewees repeatedly warned against direct replication of the Nicosia model in other contexts, stressing that decentralised cooperation must be context-specific, focused on local needs and interests, and politically calibrated. Also, as one interviewee put it, local-to-local cooperation should be pragmatic rather than dogmatic. For example, although it was possible to largely leave national authorities out of the process in Libya due to its particular political situation, this would not be possible in countries with more stable central governments and functioning institutional settings, where their involvement could be beneficial. Hence, **the key transferable elements appear to lie less in project modalities and more in enabling conditions: trusted intermediaries, credible local leadership, long-term engagement, and flexible funding arrangements.**

5. Case studies of fragile settings with potential for increased engagement through decentralised cooperation

This chapter examines six empirical cases to assess how decentralised cooperation and subnational diplomacy operate in practice across different forms of fragility. The focus is deliberately selective and comparative: rather than providing comprehensive assessments, the cases illustrate concrete governance situations in which engagement through LRAs has functioned as a viable entry point for EU-supported action.

Figure 3. Overview of case studies on decentralised cooperation in fragile settings (Eastern Mediterranean and Ukraine)

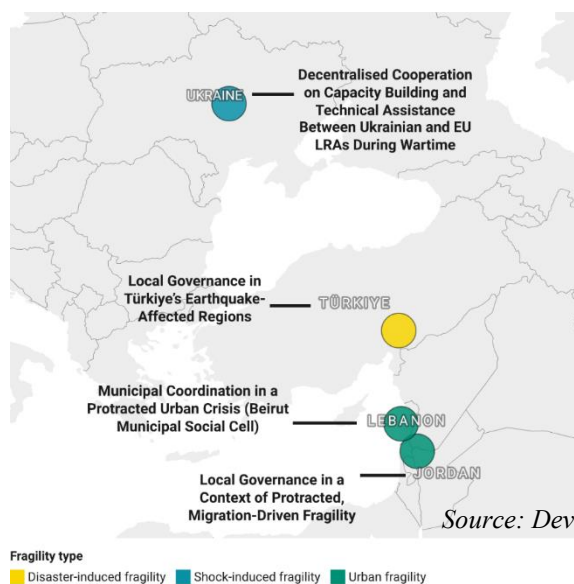
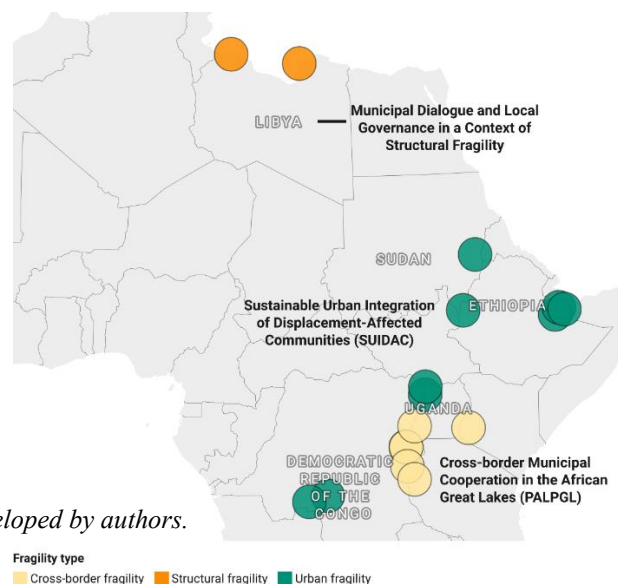


Figure 4. Overview of case studies on decentralised cooperation in fragile settings (Africa)



Source: Developed by authors.

The cases cover conflict-affected border regions, urban institutional crises, wartime governance, disaster-induced fragility and protracted displacement. **They apply a common analytical framework centred on three dimensions: the functionality and legitimacy of LRAs; existing modalities of engagement with EU or international partners; and the specific contributions of decentralised cooperation to stabilisation, resilience or social cohesion at the local level.** Figures 3 and 4 provide a geographical overview of the six case studies analysed in this chapter. They situate the cases across the EU Neighbourhood, the Middle East and Africa, offering a spatial reference for the diversity of fragile contexts and governance environments in which decentralised cooperation has been mobilised.

5.1 Cross-border municipal cooperation in the African Great Lakes (PALPGL)

Context

The Great Lakes cross-border space spans countries such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Tanzania, Uganda, Kenya, Rwanda, Burundi, Malawi, Zambia, Mozambique, Ethiopia and South Sudan. The area combines persistent political volatility with conflict dynamics that spill across borders, especially around contested territories and trade corridors. The wider regional picture is marked by chronic insecurity and large-scale displacement pressures, with humanitarian actors warning that conditions are unlikely to improve in the near term (UNDP, 2025). In this context, border areas are not peripheral spaces but constitute frontline areas where national-level tensions are experienced most directly by local populations. Markets, transport routes, shared natural resources (notably lakes), and cross-border mobility are critical to daily livelihoods, yet they can also become sources of friction and conflict. **This makes the Great Lakes region a particularly relevant setting for initiatives that seek to address fragility through local-level dialogue, cooperation and practical problem-solving.**

Local governance landscape

The local governance landscape in the African Great Lakes can be characterised by two patterns (Kerre, 2002). First, **border municipalities often carry responsibilities that exceed their formal capacity**. They are expected to facilitate coexistence, manage land and market pressures, and respond to displacement and shocks, even when staffing, budgets and systems are limited. Second, there are **strong territorial disparities**, with capital regions and a few major cities typically better resourced and politically connected than secondary cities and border towns, particularly in areas where cross-border tensions, resource competition and informal trade dynamics are most acute. These conditions explain why municipal networks and platforms (such as the International Association of Francophone Mayors, AIMF) can become so operationally important: they help municipalities coordinate across borders and partially compensate for gaps in national-level cooperation and uneven local capacity.

Existing engagement of LRAs with EU/international partners

The Platform of Local Authorities of the Great Lakes Countries (abbreviated as PALPGL in French) is a regional platform that brings together municipal leaders from Burundi, DRC and Rwanda to work jointly on peacebuilding, social cohesion, local development, the engagement of women and young people, and cross-border trade and entrepreneurship. It was initiated in 2012 as part of the work on the role of local authorities in conflict prevention and peace-building undertaken by AIMF, the Standing Committee on Cities and Intercultural Dialogue and Peace (Platforma, 2023).

After the first official launch meeting in Rubavu (Rwanda) and Goma (DRC) in July 2014, this regional dialogue has been consolidated over the years. The PALPGL has been working extensively with local elected representatives to mobilise women and young people in the dialogue process.

While the political situation in the region is threatening peace, this dialogue between mayors is increasingly important. It operates through general assemblies, with a rotating presidency, where members meet regularly to set priorities, exchange ideas and promote joint projects. Its activities strengthen local collaboration, support conflict prevention and community cooperation, and amplify local voices in regional planning and development efforts. This case study is illustrative of the existing engagement of LRAs with international partners in the Great Lakes area: the platform is supported by a network of municipalities (AIMF) under its strategic partnership with the EU, situating PALPGL within a broader EU – LRA engagement channel that operates through networks when direct bilateral cooperation with individual municipalities is constrained.

Relevance and impact

PALPGL illustrates why decentralised cooperation and subnational diplomacy can be valuable in fragile African border regions: it operates where tensions are experienced locally, where pragmatic cooperation is still possible, and where visible improvements in everyday safety and livelihoods can strengthen trust. It also aligns with EU priorities around stabilisation, resilience, gender inclusion and conflict prevention, and offers an established platform for peer learning among municipalities facing comparable constraints. The platform’s continued convening (including recent assemblies engaging themes such as environment, climate and resilience) also suggests an ability to integrate emerging drivers of fragility – such as climate stress and disaster risk – into peace and cohesion work.

- **Mayors and local authorities maintained dialogue and cooperation even when relations between central governments were tense.** This matters because it preserves functional channels for communication and coordination when national politics are blocked. By keeping relationships active through regular convenings and structured exchanges, municipalities can address practical cross-border issues (e.g. local security incidents or community tensions) before they escalate. Over time, this continuity helps institutionalise habits of cooperation and reduces the risk that political crises at the national level automatically translate into hostility at the local level. This illustrates the concept of working on *islands of stability*, supporting sustained engagement and incremental confidence-building in particularly difficult contexts.
- **Practical impacts for local populations included improvements in the safety of women traders when crossing borders, linked to agreements between mayors, the organisation of joint cross-border events and projects, and collaborative management of shared natural resources (such as lakes) to prevent conflict.** The added value lies in the translation of dialogue into tangible protection and opportunities: safer trading conditions reduce exposure to harassment and violence and stabilise household livelihoods; cross-border joint endeavours create shared civic space and reduce social fragmentation between communities; and cooperation around shared resources like lakes helps manage competition and prevents disputes over access to resources from becoming triggers for violence. The platform’s emphasis on mobilising women and youth further strengthens this prevention logic by anchoring cooperation in groups that are often both highly affected by fragility and essential to social cohesion.

Over time, the initiative evolved from a project into a structured, sustainable cross-border platform working on mediation, social cohesion, cross-border trade and local diplomacy. This evolution is significant from an EU policy perspective because it shifts from one-off activities to durable local governance infrastructure: a platform can carry institutional memory, create predictable routines for mediation and coordination, and maintain a number of locally defined priorities beyond single funding cycles. It also makes scaling up easier by adding municipalities, thematic workstreams (e.g., climate resilience), and partnerships, while remaining grounded in municipal mandates and peer accountability.

Constraints and risks

Despite its demonstrated value, PALPGL operates within a challenging environment that faces persistent constraints and risks. Its effectiveness remains exposed to wider political volatility and the risk that renewed national-level tensions could restrict local authorities' room for manoeuvre. Structural capacity limitations in border municipalities (particularly in terms of staffing, financial resources, and administrative systems) continue to shape what can realistically be delivered through the platform. The sustainability of the initiative is also linked to continued external facilitation and support, notably through AIMF and EU partnerships. While the platform has moved towards institutionalisation, reliance on external funding and coordination remains a vulnerability. Finally, operating in contexts affected by insecurity and displacement means that gains in trust and cooperation can be fragile and require sustained engagement to endure.

Nonetheless, PALPGL illustrates how decentralised cooperation – when carefully designed and embedded in municipal realities – can help mitigate some of these risks by anchoring peace and cooperation in everyday governance practices and locally defined priorities rather than in high-level political agreements alone.

5.2 Municipal Coordination in a Protracted Urban Crisis (Beirut Municipal Social Cell)

Context

Lebanon (and Beirut in particular) represents one of the most acute contexts of urban fragility in the Mediterranean region. The city combines a protracted political and economic crisis, institutional paralysis at the national level, and among the world's highest per-capita refugee concentrations, with Syrian and Palestinian refugee populations adding sustained pressure on already strained urban services. **These dynamics are compounded by fiscal collapse, currency devaluation, and the erosion of state-led social protection systems, leaving municipalities as frontline responders to social vulnerability without commensurate authority or resources.**

Local governance landscape

As in other fragile urban contexts, local governance in Beirut is marked by two structural features. First, municipalities are expected to respond to complex social needs (poverty, displacement, access to services, social tensions) despite limited financial autonomy, constrained staffing and weak vertical coordination with central government institutions. Second, service delivery is fragmented across public bodies, NGOs, UN agencies and informal actors, which can result in duplication, gaps and uneven access for vulnerable residents. These conditions create a strong rationale for municipal-level coordination mechanisms that can organise social responses even when national frameworks are stalled.

Existing engagement of LRAs with EU/international partners

The Municipal Social Cell (MSC) emerged precisely in this space. It developed initially as a Targeted City Action under the Mediterranean City-to-City Migration (MC2CM) project, implemented by ICMPD, United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) and UN-Habitat⁶. The MSC aimed to strengthen Beirut Municipality's capacity to coordinate social assistance and migration-related services at local level. Rather than creating a new service delivery structure, the initiative focused on improving municipal governance, referral and coordination functions, positioning the municipality as a legitimate convenor among diverse actors working with vulnerable populations.

The MSC was designed as an internal municipal mechanism bringing together relevant municipal departments, liaising with external stakeholders such as NGOs, international organisations and community actors, to improve identification of needs, case referral and follow-up for vulnerable residents, including refugees and low-income Lebanese households. In a context where national social policy frameworks were weak or non-operational, this approach allowed the city to re-establish a degree of strategic oversight without overstepping its formal mandate.

Relevance and impact

⁶ The Mediterranean City-to-City Migration (MC2CM) project was funded by the European Union and co-funded by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, between 01.07.2018 and 30.06.2022, and implemented in Libya, Morocco, Tunisia, Jordan, Lebanon, State of Palestine, Austria, France, Germany, Italy, Portugal and Spain: <https://www.icmpd.org/our-work/projects/mc2cm>. The project was extended for a second phase, including Algeria as well.

The case study is highly representative of **EU – LRA engagement in migration and social cohesion in the Mediterranean**. Cooperation often works through city networks and pilot actions, rather than through direct, large-scale bilateral support to individual municipalities. However, MC2CM provided a flexible framework for peer learning, technical assistance, and experimentation, enabling Beirut to adapt good practices from other Mediterranean cities while responding to its own highly specific crisis conditions. The MSC thus sits at the intersection of EU priorities on migration governance, urban resilience and local service coordination. The added value of the Municipal Social Cell is evident in several respects:

- **By establishing the MSC, Beirut Municipality strengthened its role as a coordinating actor rather than a passive recipient of externally driven projects.** Even with limited resources, the municipality was able to structure dialogue with NGOs and international partners, improve information flows, and reduce overlaps in social assistance. This matters in crisis contexts where the absence of coordination can exacerbate tensions between host communities and displaced populations.
- **The MSC contributed to clearer referral pathways and more consistent follow-up for vulnerable households, including migrants and refugees.** The practical value lies in making assistance more navigable: individuals facing poverty, housing insecurity, or protection risks were less likely to be missed due to institutional gaps. This reinforced social stability by reducing perceptions of arbitrariness or exclusion in aid distribution.
- By addressing the needs of both Lebanese residents and displaced populations through a municipal lens, the **MSC helped mitigate “us versus them” dynamics that often emerge in high-pressure urban settings.** Framing vulnerability in socio-economic rather than purely legal or nationality terms aligns with EU approaches to inclusive urban resilience and reduces the risk that migration becomes a trigger for localised conflict.
- Although initiated as a targeted action, the **MSC illustrates how time-bound projects can leave behind durable governance practices.** The creation of routines for coordination, data-sharing, and interdepartmental cooperation strengthened institutional memory within the municipality. This evolution – from an externally supported pilot to an embedded municipal function – is particularly significant in fragile contexts where lack of continuity is often among the first casualties of crises.

As part of MC2CM, Beirut’s experience **can contribute to broader Mediterranean city exchanges on migration governance**. This networked approach allows lessons from Beirut to inform other cities facing displacement and social stress, while also giving Beirut access to comparative experiences that compensate for limited national guidance.

Constraints and risks

While the Municipal Social Cell demonstrates the potential of city-level coordination in migration-affected and crisis-prone urban settings, it also operates under significant structural constraints. Its effectiveness depends on municipal convening capacity in a context of prolonged political deadlock, weak national frameworks, and limited local authority and resources. Coordination gains remain fragile, as they rely on voluntary cooperation among a fragmented set of actors and are exposed to funding uncertainty, partner turnover and recurrent economic and political shocks. As a result, while decentralised cooperation through city networks can deliver tangible improvements, sustaining and scaling these gains in Lebanon’s volatile governance environment remains a significant challenge.

5.3 Decentralised cooperation on capacity building and technical assistance between Ukrainian and EU LRAs during wartime⁷

Context

On 24 February 2022, Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, causing widespread devastation. As in the case of many other conflict-affected fragile settings, the role of LRAs in ensuring the restoration of basic social and housing services, provision of food supplies and the accommodation of significant numbers of internally displaced persons has been essential (Ukraine Facility, 2024, p. 184). LRAs will also play a key role in the subsequent reconstruction and modernisation of the country. However, due to war-related damage, **many communities require urgent state and international support**. They have seen a reduction in economic prospects and a decrease in their own revenues, as Russia’s invasion placed significant pressure on their administrative and financial capacities (Ministry for Restoration of Ukraine, 2023).

Local governance landscape

Ukraine has four legally defined levels of government: national, regional (oblasts), district (raions) and local (hromadas). The cities of Kyiv and Sevastopol have special status, whereas Crimea – which has been under Russian occupation since 2014 – is an autonomous republic. The present structure stems from a decentralisation reform carried out between 2014 and 2020 (Ukraine Facility, 2024). The reform aimed to transfer powers, responsibilities and resources from the central level to local self-government, and to amalgamate territorial communities. The reform is widely regarded as successful and is considered to have significantly strengthened Ukraine’s resilience during wartime. Thus, further decentralisation efforts are now being pursued in the context of Ukraine’s EU accession. While the decentralisation reform remains a strategic priority, its implementation has slowed due to the war, the imposition of martial law and the transfer of certain local powers to military administrations, raising concerns about a potential shift towards “re-centralisation” (Darkovich, & Savisko, 2024).

Existing engagement of LRAs with EU/international partners

In this crisis, the EU and several of its Member States have emerged as key international actors supporting Ukrainian LRAs. This support is multi-faceted ranging from delivery of financial and humanitarian aid to technical expertise, assistance with legislative harmonisation and programmes designed to strengthen administrative capacity.

⁷ This section is based on the interviews and on the previous work on the study, “Capacity building for local and regional authorities in the light of the Ukraine Facility (Pillar III)”, available at https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/eaf4705c-555e-11f0-a9d0-01aa75ed71a1/language-en?WT.mc_id=Searchresult&WT.ria_c=125603&WT.ria_f=8103&WT.ria_ev=search&WT.URL=https%3A%2F%2Fcor.europa.eu%2F.

Relevance and impact

In June 2022, the CoR, in cooperation with partner associations, created the **European Alliance of Cities and Regions for the Reconstruction of Ukraine** in order to coordinate recovery and reconstruction initiatives between EU and Ukrainian LRAs, promote good governance and facilitate the exchange of expertise (European Committee of the Regions, n.d.a). The Alliance has actively engaged in political advocacy by organising annual events on the local and regional dimensions of Ukraine’s reconstruction and formulating recommendations ahead of the Ukraine Recovery Conferences. Furthermore, hundreds of Ukrainian communities have already established international partnerships, promoting participation in European programmes. Initiatives such as **Cities4Cities | United4Ukraine, the Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR) Matchmaking platform, and the CoR Forum for Strengthening Municipal Partnerships between the EU and Ukraine** facilitate the establishment of such partnerships. Also, the **U-LEAD with Europe programme** has launched several projects to encourage cooperation between the EU and Ukrainian LRAs: **Bridges of Trust, Polish–Ukrainian Municipal Cooperation, and TIPS4UA**. The latter, also coordinated by the CoR and the U-LEAD programme, is a recent initiative that was developed under the European Alliance for Cities and Regions for the Reconstruction of Ukraine. TIPS4UA seeks to build capacity and provide technical support to the Ukrainian municipalities and regions through training and internship opportunities for LRA’s staff (European Committee of the Regions, n.d.c).

The pilot phase of this project finished successfully in 2025. This initiative demonstrates potential not only as an effective tool for delivering training opportunities but also as a catalyst for building sustainable partnerships. In addition, participation in this programme helped to establish personal relationships that can make officials from LRAs in the EU more familiar with the situation on the ground in Ukraine and can foster deeper collaboration between the EU and Ukrainian LRAs. The 2026 edition of the programme has been extended to Ukrainian regions and places more attention to small municipalities, aiming to ensure that even smaller and less-resourced communities can actively participate in Ukraine’s reconstruction and EU integration efforts.

Constraints and risks

To effectively carry out their responsibilities, Ukrainian LRAs need adequate administrative capacity and financial resources, making capacity-building indispensable in the current wartime context. As this case demonstrates, the EU continues to support this process through a variety of initiatives that draw on decentralised cooperation between LRAs in the EU and Ukraine. This will be particularly important in the context of the country’s recovery, reconstruction and modernisation, as municipalities strive to attract foreign funding and investment.⁸ Capacity-building will also be essential to enable LRAs to play an active role in Ukraine’s EU accession process, ensuring they are prepared to meet EU standards and fully benefit from available pre-accession financing.

⁸ See more in the CoR study, “Capacity building for local and regional authorities in the light of the Ukraine Facility (Pillar III)”, available at https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/caf4705c-555e-11f0-a9d0-01aa75ed71a1/language-en?WT.mc_id=Searchresult&WT.ria_c=125603&WT.ria_f=8103&WT.ria_ev=search&WT.URL=https%3A%2F%2Fcor.europa.eu%2F.

Initiatives such as the aforementioned TIPS4UA programme play a key role in bringing practitioners together, providing engaging training opportunities and laying the foundation for sustainable partnerships and concrete cooperation between Ukrainian and EU peers. Political willingness is arguably the most important constraint. Support for Ukraine is not equally strong across EU Member States, and their national foreign policy orientations may impact the engagement of domestic LRAs. The second main constraint is the lack of financial support, which discouraged some of the LRAs in the EU who wanted to participate in the programme. Meanwhile, the main risk is associated with the military situation on the ground, which affects the participation of Ukrainian LRAs close to the frontline – those that are more vulnerable and in need of support.

5.4 Local governance in Türkiye's earthquake-affected regions

Context

The February 2023 twin earthquakes in southeastern Türkiye, with epicentres in Pazarcık and Elbistan, affected 11 provinces, including Kahramanmaraş, Malatya, Gaziantep, Hatay, Adana, Kilis, Adıyaman, Diyarbakır, Şanlıurfa and Osmaniye, and resulted in significant loss of life, destruction of housing and infrastructure, and large-scale displacement. In the immediate aftermath, the magnitude of the crisis overwhelmed national response systems, particularly during the first days, creating acute humanitarian and governance gaps. **Municipalities became immediate frontline actors for search and rescue support, emergency shelter, food distribution and restoration of basic services, often mobilising before national coordination mechanisms were fully operational** (Türkiye Belediyeler Birliği, 2023c).

Local governance landscape

Türkiye's disaster response is formally organised under the Türkiye Disaster Response Plan (TAMP), coordinated by the Disaster and Emergency Management Authority (AFAD). TAMP defines a multi-level system assigning responsibilities to national, provincial and local actors across preparedness, response and recovery phases. Municipalities are legally responsible for core local services (including water and sanitation, waste management, local roads, fire services and certain social support functions). In disaster contexts, this translate into operational roles such as debris management, emergency logistics support, maintenance of temporary shelter areas and restoration of essential services (Cifuentes-Faura, 2024).

However, the broader local governance context is characterised by strong administrative centralisation and limited fiscal autonomy. Decision-making over reconstruction finance, land use and housing policy remains concentrated at the central level.⁹ As in other fragile settings, this creates a structural mismatch: municipalities are expected to respond to complex shocks without corresponding authority or resources. Larger municipalities generally possess stronger administrative capacity, equipment and staffing than smaller or secondary municipalities, particularly in severely affected provinces. These disparities influenced response effectiveness and underline persistent inequalities in local administrative resilience (Bayraktar, 2023).

Many municipal institutions in the earthquake-affected provinces also suffered direct physical and human losses: a significant number of municipal service buildings, administrative facilities, depots, workshops and fire stations were damaged or destroyed, alongside extensive losses of municipal equipment and vehicle fleets essential for core services such as waste collection, water and sanitation, firefighting and debris removal. Municipal human resources were also affected, with local administrations reporting staff

⁹ <https://www.u4.no/publications/turkiye-corruption-risks-and-anti-corruption-measures-for-post-earthquake-recovery>

fatalities, injuries and displacement (T.C. Cumhurbaşkanlığı Strateji ve Bütçe Başkanlığı, 2023).

Existing engagement of LRAs with EU/international partners

Municipal responses were reinforced through **horizontal cooperation and international municipal solidarity, largely coordinated through the Union of Municipalities of Türkiye (UMT, or TBB in Turkish)**. In the immediate aftermath of the earthquakes, **UMT established a central crisis desk to maintain communication with affected municipalities and channel assistance from domestic and international municipal partners.**¹⁰ UMT also coordinated the mobilisation and deployment of municipal assets (including heavy machinery, fire brigades, 4×4 vehicles and aid vans) donated by municipalities from Türkiye and abroad, ensuring alignment with locally identified needs and AFAD priorities. International offers of support from foreign municipalities and development agencies were similarly coordinated to facilitate on-the-ground deployment and accommodation arrangements (TBB, 2023c). In the recovery phase, cooperation evolved into more structured capacity-building initiatives. Most notably, TBB/UMT partnered with VNG International (the international cooperation agency of Dutch municipalities) to implement a Recovery and Reconstruction Project that supports selected pilot municipalities (including Kahramanmaraş Metropolitan Municipality, Osmaniye Municipality and Seyhan Municipality) through technical assistance, peer learning and small grants, focusing on post-disaster planning, organisational structures and preparedness for future shocks (TBB, 2023b).

In addition to municipal networks and bilateral cooperation, civil society and local democracy organisations also engaged directly with local authorities to address urgent shelter needs in earthquake-affected regions. For instance, ALDA implemented a targeted humanitarian support project in Hatay province. Funded by the “Fons Mallorquí de Solidaritat i Cooperació”, ALDA provided 264 beds to households living in temporary shelter sites, directly complementing the efforts to address critical living conditions for displaced families, focusing on children, the elderly and individuals with disabilities (ALDA, n.d.).

The CoR also supported local authorities in Türkiye. Shortly after the disaster, the Chair of the CoR Working Group on Türkiye, Antje Grotheer, engaged with mayors from affected municipalities and shared their calls for support with EU local and regional authorities. During the 28th CoR Türkiye Working Group meeting held in Brussels in May 2023, the earthquakes were a central agenda item and discussions focused on the role of municipalities in recovery, resilience and disaster management (TBB, 2023a).

Relevance and impact

As municipalities assumed central operational roles, clear entry points emerged for cooperation focused on recovery planning, service restoration and disaster preparedness. Municipal networks enabled coordinated horizontal cooperation among municipalities and structured engagement with international partners, complementing state-led response mechanisms and demonstrating how post-emergency solidarity can be converted into institutional capacity building. **Recovery-oriented cooperation, including technical assistance and peer learning supported by European partners, has focused on strengthening municipal planning, organisational preparedness and the mainstreaming of resilience within existing governance frameworks.** These illustrate how decentralised

¹⁰ <https://www.tbb.gov.tr/en/node/4556>

cooperation can reinforce local governance functions and disaster risk management capacities without requiring formal reforms. This aligns with global shifts in disaster risk governance that increasingly recognise the local level as critical for effective prevention, preparedness and recovery.

Overall, the case demonstrates that decentralised cooperation and subnational diplomacy can play a meaningful role in disaster-affected settings by supporting municipalities as operational and coordinating actors. Even where formal decentralisation is limited, engagement with local authorities through networks, technical cooperation and recovery-focused partnerships can strengthen local resilience, improve governance practices and sustain collaboration between EU actors and local governments.

Constraints and risks

Municipal action remains constrained by centralised decision-making over reconstruction finance, land use and housing policy, limiting their influence over recovery trajectories. Capacity gaps in staffing and technical expertise, especially in smaller municipalities, risk reinforcing territorial inequalities during reconstruction (Bayraktar, 2023). Moreover, much decentralised cooperation remains largely project-based and externally facilitated, raising sustainability concerns once emergency-linked attention and funding decline.

Nonetheless, the case demonstrates that municipal governance can act as a stabilising layer in disaster-induced fragility. Even in the absence of strong formal decentralisation, municipalities' operational proximity to communities and their service delivery mandates position them as critical actors for crisis response and recovery, and as viable partners for EU engagement in fragile settings.

5.5 Local governance in a context of protracted, migration-driven fragility in Jordan

Context

Since the outbreak of the Syrian conflict in 2011, Jordan has hosted approximately 1.3 million Syrians, placing it among the countries with the highest number of refugees per capita globally (UNHCR, n.d.). Unlike camp-centred displacement contexts, around 80-85% of Syrian refugees in Jordan live in urban and peri-urban areas (UNHCR, n.d.). This urban settlement pattern has significantly affected municipalities in the northern governorates (particularly Irbid and Mafrq) that experienced sustained population growth linked to refugee settlement, leading to increased demand for housing, water, sanitation, waste management and local infrastructure (Al-Masaeid, & Onur, 2024). While Jordan has maintained overall political stability, the scale and duration of displacement have transformed refugee response from a humanitarian issue into a long-term local governance challenge. **Municipalities have become frontline actors managing the everyday impacts of displacement on services and community relations, while refugee policy and international coordination remain largely centralised.**

Local governance landscape

Jordan's local governance system is highly centralised, with municipalities having limited fiscal autonomy and relying heavily on central government transfers. Municipal responsibilities formally include solid waste management, street cleaning, local roads and public spaces, but municipalities have constrained revenue-raising powers and limited capacity to scale services in response to rapid population growth (WB, 2016a & 2016b). The refugee influx significantly increased demand for services without a proportional increase in municipal resources, staff or infrastructure. National assessments indicate that municipal solid waste generation increased by approximately 25% due to refugee inflows, with the most acute pressure concentrated in northern governorates (The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, 2019; Ministry of Environment of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, 2025).

Existing engagement of LRAs with EU/international partners

Municipal responses in migration-affected areas of Jordan have been strongly shaped by EU and international engagement, primarily through resilience and service-oriented programmes rather than direct humanitarian action. LRAs have been positioned not as policymakers but as implementation and coordination hubs, translating international support into tangible service provision while mediating local impacts of displacement.

The WB's Emergency Services and Social Resilience Project (ESSRP) and its successor, the Municipal Services and Social Resilience Project (MSSRP), provided predictable financing and technical support to municipalities hosting large refugee populations. These programmes explicitly recognised municipalities as stabilising actors and channelled funding to sustain core services, such as waste collection, local roads and public spaces, under conditions of prolonged demographic pressure. Cumulative financing exceeded USD 100 million, with northern municipalities among the primary beneficiaries (WB, 2016b).

EU engagement has similarly focused on strengthening municipal service delivery in refugee-hosting areas. In Mafraq Governorate, EU-funded initiatives have supported waste management, environmental rehabilitation and livelihoods, working through municipal structures and in coordination with national ministries. A recent EUR 25 million EU-funded solid waste management programme, implemented with partners such as Oxfam, targets municipalities around Mafraq, Zaatari and Azraq, combining service improvements with job creation and community engagement for both refugees and host populations (EEAS, 2021; EU Neighbours South, 2025). German Development Cooperation has complemented these efforts through support to urban waste management and municipal capacity building in northern cities, focusing on operational improvements and institutional strengthening rather than parallel refugee-specific systems (Giz, 2016).

Relevance and impact

The Jordanian case highlights how migration-driven fragility creates space for **pragmatic decentralised cooperation centred on essential municipal services**. Supporting waste management, sanitation and local infrastructure offers a politically neutral entry point for addressing refugee-related pressures while delivering visible benefits to both host communities and displaced populations (EEAS, 2021; Ministry of Environment of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, 2025). Decentralised cooperation has emerged primarily through direct engagement between municipalities and international local government actors on concrete service delivery challenges, rather than through formal policy dialogue. This is evident in the way municipalities have been recognised and engaged as counterparts by EU institutions and development partners, rather than being treated solely as implementing units of national policy. This has enabled municipalities to access technical assistance, peer learning and predictable financing, strengthening their capacity to manage long-term demographic change rather than short-term emergencies.

Constraints and risks

There are risks linked to the project-based nature of international support, including fragmentation and uncertainty once funding cycles end. As displacement remains protracted, ensuring that decentralised cooperation translates into durable municipal capacity and service resilience – rather than temporary crisis management – remains a key challenge.

5.6 A city-led approach to integrating displaced communities (the Sustainable Urban Integration of Displacement-Affected Communities - SUIDAC)

Context

Urban displacement is no longer a peripheral issue in Sub-Saharan Africa: cities are increasingly on the frontline of managing the influx and settlement of refugees, internally displaced persons (IDPs), returnees and host communities. **Rapid urbanisation combined with climate pressures, conflict and economic displacement means that secondary cities are facing soaring demands on services, infrastructure, land and livelihoods, often with limited governance capacity and resources (IOM, 2024).** In this context, SUIDAC is positioned as an alternative to traditional displacement responses that prioritise camps or emergency assistance, by reframing cities as primary actors in sustainable integration and local governance (Cities Alliance, 2024). The initiative’s focus on urban integration directly addresses a key fragility dynamic, whereby unmet displacement-related needs risk social tensions, exclusion and competition over scarce services.

Local governance landscape

Cities participating in SUIDAC – typically secondary urban centres in DRC, Ethiopia, Somalia, Sudan and Uganda – carry complex responsibilities at the intersection of urban development and displacement management (Cities Alliance, 2024). These municipalities confront strained infrastructure, limited fiscal autonomy, weak planning systems and service gaps in health, education, water and sanitation, all while absorbing growing populations. By placing municipal authorities at the centre of planning and implementation, SUIDAC builds on municipal leadership, inclusive governance frameworks and community dialogue to support integrated responses rooted in local realities.

Existing engagement of LRAs with EU/international partners

SUIDAC is a four-year, EUR 30 million EU-funded initiative, implemented by Cities Alliance with support from several Technical Implementing Partners (Cities Alliance, 2024). The programme is grounded in a partnership model that includes municipalities, civil society, refugee-led organisations and regional actors. Its design builds on earlier efforts under the “Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF): Inclusive Urban Development and Mobility Action”, expanding from pilot cities to a broader network of nine secondary cities across five countries. The first phase involved participatory feasibility studies, co-produced with communities, to ensure that implementation is locally owned and tailored to each context. Regional dialogues and peer-learning mechanisms strengthen collaboration and knowledge exchange between cities, positioning SUIDAC within wider EU-local government engagement on migration, urban planning and social cohesion.

Relevance and impact

The SUIDAC programme demonstrates how **decentralised cooperation can bridge humanitarian and development agendas by working through municipalities as coordinating actors for inclusive service delivery and local development.** By addressing the needs of both displaced populations and host communities (including access to services,

livelihoods, documentation and protection), the programme contributes to social cohesion and helps mitigate exclusionary dynamics that often emerge in displacement-affected cities. A key opportunity lies in the integration of displacement considerations into broader urban development planning. SUIDAC supports municipalities in incorporating displacement into urban policy, spatial planning and local economic strategies, aligning emergency response with longer-term resilience and inclusion objectives. This approach strengthens municipalities' ability to manage demographic pressure in a sustainable manner, while reinforcing locally driven development processes consistent with EU priorities on resilience and inclusive growth. The programme's city-led implementation has begun to translate into concrete outcomes for local populations. Through participatory feasibility studies co-designed with communities, municipalities are laying the groundwork for inclusive infrastructure investments in areas such as education, health, water and sanitation, alongside measures to support local economic opportunities and improved land management. These interventions aim to reduce service strain, benefit both displaced population and host communities and strengthen shared civic engagement in urban development.

More broadly, SUIDAC represents a shift from ad-hoc displacement responses towards durable municipal governance capacity. By strengthening local planning systems, fostering city-to-city cooperation and establishing steering committees that link local and national levels, the programme helps institutionalise routines for policy dialogue, participatory planning and service coordination beyond individual project cycles. In doing so, it positions LRAs as credible and sustained partners in both humanitarian and development cooperation.

Constraints and risks

While the project has supported viable locally grounded responses, the reliance on external financing and coordination remains a vulnerability. Sustaining momentum beyond donor funding cycles will require strengthened municipal financing, national policy alignment and institutionalisation of inclusive governance practices. Moreover, delivering tangible service improvements amidst broader structural constraints (infrastructure deficits, legal identity gaps and land security issues) means that outcomes may materialise slowly, and sustained engagement is necessary to embed gains into routine governance functions.

5.7 Key takeaways

Taken together, the case studies examined in this chapter provide a set of insights into the conditions under which decentralised cooperation and subnational diplomacy can constitute a meaningful entry point for EU engagement in fragile and conflict-affected contexts. While the cases differ significantly in terms of geography, type of fragility and governance arrangements, several cross-cutting patterns emerge that are relevant for future EU action, and for the CoR in particular.

a) LRAs operate as frontline governance actors under conditions of fragility

Across all six cases, LRAs emerge as primary operational actors responding to fragility on the ground. In the African Great Lakes, border municipalities manage coexistence and cross-border tensions in the absence of effective national coordination. In Beirut, the municipality assumed a coordinating role for social assistance amid national institutional paralysis. In Ukraine and Türkiye, municipalities became central to crisis response, service continuity and recovery planning during wartime and disaster-induced shocks, respectively. These cases confirm that local relevance stems from operational necessity rather than formal decentralisation alone.

b) Decentralised cooperation adapts to different drivers of fragility

The case studies show that decentralised cooperation takes distinct forms depending on the underlying fragility dynamics. In conflict-affected border regions such as the Great Lakes, cooperation sustains dialogue and practical coexistence. In protracted urban crises, as illustrated by Beirut, it supports governance continuity and coordination. In Ukraine, peer-to-peer cooperation has focused on administrative resilience and reconstruction capacity under wartime pressure, while in Türkiye and Jordan, it reinforces recovery and service delivery in disaster- and displacement-affected settings.

c) Engagement is mediated through platforms and networks rather than bilateral links

In all cases, decentralised cooperation is structured through intermediary platforms rather than isolated city-to-city partnerships. PALPGL operates through a cross-border municipal network; Beirut's Municipal Social Cell emerged within a Mediterranean city-to-city framework; cooperation with Ukrainian municipalities is channelled through alliances and structured programmes; and post-earthquake cooperation in Türkiye has been coordinated through national

and international municipal networks. These platforms provide continuity, reduce political risk and enable participation by municipalities with limited international exposure.

d) Credibility is linked to tangible outcomes for local populations

The case studies consistently show that decentralised cooperation gains legitimacy when it delivers practical results. Examples include safer cross-border trade for women in the Great Lakes, referral pathways for vulnerable households in Beirut, improved administrative capacity for Ukrainian municipalities, and strengthened service delivery and preparedness in earthquake-affected areas of Türkiye and refugee-hosting municipalities in Jordan. These outcomes anchor cooperation in everyday governance rather than abstract dialogue.

e) Municipal capacity and territorial inequalities shape results

Across cases, disparities in administrative capacity and resources affect the depth and sustainability of engagement. Capital cities, metropolitan municipalities and well-connected local authorities, such as Beirut and larger Ukrainian and Turkish municipalities, are better positioned to engage internationally, while smaller border towns or secondary cities face greater barriers. Where cooperation is channelled through networks or pooled mechanisms, as in the Great Lakes and SUIDAC cases, these asymmetries can be partially mitigated.

f) Sustainability depends on continuity and external facilitation

The case studies highlight that decentralised cooperation in fragile settings remains highly sensitive to funding continuity, external facilitation and political support. In Lebanon and the Great Lakes, reliance on external partners remains a structural vulnerability; in Ukraine, security conditions and uneven political support across the EU shapes engagement; and in disaster-affected Türkiye, cooperation risks losing momentum once emergency funding declines. Across contexts, sustained presence and predictable support matter more than scale or visibility.

g) Implications for selecting future contexts

Overall, the case studies suggest that **decentralised cooperation is most relevant in fragile contexts where three conditions coincide**: (1) local authorities retain a minimum degree of legitimacy and functionality; (2) national-level engagement is constrained, politicised or insufficient; and (3) intermediaries or networks exist or can be built to support coordination and continuity. These conditions can be understood as a forward-looking analytical framework rather than as a basis for

selecting specific partner countries for decentralised development cooperation. They are particularly relevant for informing future EU engagement in fragile and conflict-affected settings (including contexts such as Syria or Lebanon, as well as rapidly deteriorating fragile contexts, such as Venezuela) where economic collapse, displacement and institutional fragmentation place growing pressure on subnational actors, and where decentralised cooperation potentially could support the continuation of local governance functions and service delivery amid ongoing uncertainty.

Conclusions

This study has explored the role of LRAs and decentralised cooperation in sustaining and adapting EU engagement in fragile and conflict-affected settings. Building on a comprehensive literature review, a policy analysis of EU and international frameworks, empirical evidence drawn from expert interviews and case studies, the study confirms that fragility is increasingly multidimensional, territorially differentiated and persistent.

A first overarching conclusion is that fragility cannot be adequately understood or addressed solely through a national-level perspective. While state institutions remain essential interlocutors, the analysis demonstrates that in many settings, national governance structures are weakened, contested or unevenly present across territories. LRAs therefore constitute a critical interface between public authority and citizens, particularly with regard to service delivery, crisis response, social cohesion and everyday conflict management. This finding aligns with and reinforces existing OECD, UNDP and WB analyses, while adding a distinctly territorial and multi-level governance perspective relevant to EU external action.

Second, the study finds that **decentralisation and effective local governance function as important resilience and stability factors, even in contexts where formal decentralisation processes are incomplete or politically constrained.** The evidence suggests that strengthening local governance capacities not only supports service provision, but can also mitigate some of the drivers of fragility by enhancing institutional legitimacy, responsiveness and trust at the community level. Promoting decentralisation should therefore be seen not merely as a governance reform objective, but as a component of broader EU efforts aimed at conflict prevention, stabilisation and resilience-building.

Third, the study demonstrates that **decentralised cooperation and city diplomacy are valuable instruments for sustaining EU engagement in fragile settings where traditional state-to-state cooperation is limited.** These modalities enable continued dialogue, peer-to-peer learning and institutional support at a local level, while remaining adaptable to highly volatile environments. Importantly, the analysis shows that decentralised cooperation does not substitute national engagement, but rather complements it by rooting EU action in local realities and preserving governance capacities during periods of crisis.

Fourth, a cross-cutting conclusion concerns the conditions under which decentralised cooperation can be effective and sustainable. The findings of this analysis consistently emphasise **the importance of early-stage stakeholder**

mapping, contextual understanding and trust-building. Initiatives such as the Nicosia Initiative illustrate that identifying relevant local actors and their associations, and working through trusted focal points on the ground, is essential for navigating complex local power dynamics and ensuring local ownership. **Without such groundwork, decentralised cooperation risks fragmentation, duplication or limited impact.**

Fifth, the study highlights the **interdependence between decentralised cooperation, capacity-building and access to finance.** Evidence from EU-supported initiatives shows that LRAs' ability to engage in recovery, reconstruction or modernisation processes depends on their administrative and technical capacity to attract and manage funding. Programmes that combine peer-to-peer cooperation with structured training and knowledge exchange can therefore act as enablers for broader investment and funding mobilisation, particularly when major financial actors are present or engaged.

Finally, the analysis highlights the **contribution that the CoR, together with networks and associations of local and regional authorities, can make in strengthening the local dimension of the EU's integrated approach to fragility.** As a political body with convening capacity and expertise in multi-level governance, the CoR is well placed to support political dialogue, exchange of experience and peer learning on decentralised cooperation in fragile contexts. Initiatives such as the Nicosia Initiative provide useful reference points that can inspire and inform similar engagements by other actors, rather than constituting a model for large-scale operational replication by the CoR itself. In this respect, the added value lies in fostering visibility, coherence and mutual learning among existing initiatives, building on established cooperation frameworks between local authority networks and the EC, while keeping expectations aligned with the CoR's political mandate.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are addressed primarily to EU institutions and bodies involved in external action, including the EC, the EEAS and the CoR, as well as to European and partner-country LRAs engaged in fragile settings. They are intended to inform policy development and institutional arrangements, rather than serving as binding operational guidance. Overall, they translate the analytical findings of this study into orientations aimed at strengthening the effectiveness and sustainability of EU engagement at the subnational level in fragile contexts.

1. Strengthening the local dimension of the EU's integrated approach to fragility

The EU should further consolidate the recognition of LRAs as both governance and political actors in fragile and conflict-affected contexts. This recognition should be reflected not only in policy documents, but also in operational guidance, programming practices and, above all, funding instruments. LRAs should be systematically considered in country analyses, conflict assessments and programming cycles, particularly where national-level engagement is constrained or contested.

2. Investing in decentralisation as a stability and resilience factor

The EU should continue to support decentralisation reforms where politically feasible, while also engaging pragmatically with existing local governance structures in highly fragile contexts. Support to LRAs should prioritise functional performance, legitimacy and service delivery rather than formal institutional design alone.

3. Systematically mapping local stakeholders and governance ecosystems

Before initiating new programmes or partnerships, the EU and its implementing partners should prioritise comprehensive mapping of local stakeholders, including LRAs, their associations, informal governance actors and existing cooperation networks. Evidence from the Nicosia Initiative and other case studies demonstrates that local focal points can play a crucial role in identifying credible partners, building trust and facilitating coordination. Stakeholder mapping should be treated as an essential component of programme design rather than a preliminary technical exercise.

4. Investing in intermediaries, platforms and networks

The study highlights the central role played by intermediaries, platforms and municipal networks in enabling decentralised cooperation in fragile settings. Such structures help reduce political and administrative risks, lower transaction costs, ensure continuity over time and support municipalities with more limited international experience or connections. The EU should therefore consider investing not only in individual LRAs, but especially in the wider ecosystems that sustain cooperation, including networks, secretariats and facilitation or coordination mechanisms.

In this context, initiatives such as the Nicosia Initiative can serve as illustrative examples of how intermediaries and structured platforms can help support local engagement in fragile settings. The role of the CoR should be understood primarily as political and convening in nature, contributing to reflection, visibility and exchange of experience, rather than as an operational intermediary. Responsibility for implementation and long-term engagement rests with LRAs themselves and with established networks and associations, working within existing cooperation frameworks with EU institutions, international partners and donors.

5. Ensuring conflict-sensitive, context-specific and realistic engagement

EU engagement with LRAs in fragile settings must be grounded in assessments of local capacity and security conditions. Decentralised cooperation should be context-specific, interest-driven and politically tailored, avoiding one-size-fits-all approaches. Long-term commitment, flexibility and conflict sensitivity are essential to prevent unintended consequences and to maximise the stabilising potential of local engagement.

6. Linking capacity-building explicitly to access to funding

Capacity-building efforts should be designed with a clear focus on enabling LRAs to access, manage and use external funding. The experience of initiatives such as TIPS4UA shows that the presence of major financial actors can create strong incentives for participation when capacity-building addresses concrete administrative, financial and procedural barriers. EU-supported peer-to-peer exchanges between European and partner-country LRAs can play a critical role in improving project design, financial management and compliance capacities.

7. Providing predictable and adequate financial support for decentralised cooperation

Sustained engagement by European LRAs in fragile settings is unlikely without appropriate financial backing. The EU should explore dedicated funding mechanisms for decentralised cooperation, simplified administrative procedures and risk-sharing arrangements. The cases examined show that the withdrawal of European partners is often linked less to a lack of interest than to insufficient long-term funding.

8. Improve monitoring and learning on local-level engagement in fragile settings

Evaluation frameworks should better capture qualitative and process-oriented outcomes, such as trust-building, institutional continuity, coordination capacity and local resilience, complementing traditional quantitative, output-based indicators. Strengthening learning and feedback mechanisms would improve the evidence base for the EU's local approach to fragility and support more adaptive policy-making over time.

Taken together, these recommendations point towards a more sustainable and locally rooted EU approach to fragility; one that treats decentralised cooperation and subnational diplomacy as assets rather than marginal tools, and that aligns political ambition with operational realities on the ground.

Annexes

Table 1. Fragility: Main trends of fragility across its 6 dimensions (OECD, 2025)

6 Dimensions of Fragility	Emerging Trends (2025)
Security	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Fragility in the security dimension has increased in 93 of 177 contexts since 2015 - Violent conflict highly concentrated: in 2023, 27 of 61 high/extreme contexts affected by organised violence - 47 of 59 state-based armed conflicts involve at least one high/extreme fragility context - 25 out of 29 contexts experiencing high levels of security fragility also experience high political fragility, which highlights interlinkages between fragility dimensions - Peacefulness has declined in 12 of the last 16 years; nearly 200,000 political-violence events recorded in 2024 - Rise in transnational militancy, cyber and digital insecurity - Rising armed conflict and multi-layered violence; prevention under-resourced
Economic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - High/extreme fragility contexts host 25% of world population but 72% of extreme poor (projected 92% by 2040) - Median per-capita growth approximately 2% in high-fragility contexts; negative in extreme fragility - Less than 5% of global net FDI goes to high/extreme fragility contexts - FDI declining since 2012; remittances a substantial share of GDP in many contexts; fiscal space severely constrained - Slowing, unequal, two-tiered growth and debt burdens driving economic fragility - Rising debt distress, dependency on remittances
Political	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Democratic backsliding, digital authoritarianism, increased use of violence - Political fragility has increased in 28 of 43 high-fragility contexts since 2015 - Political and societal fragility have risen in 107 of 177 contexts (third wave of autocratisation) - No high/extreme fragility context is on track to achieve SDGs on peace, hunger, health and gender equality - Data gaps and weak administrative capacity: SDG data coverage in high/extreme fragility contexts now improving on only 5 of 16 SDGs (down from 10/16)
Environmental	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Climate-driven displacement and competition over water - Globally stable but worsening regional climate and resource stress hotspots - Overall environmental fragility relatively static, but rising sharply in regional hotspots (Sahel, Middle East) - Climate change compounds desertification, water scarcity, flooding, droughts and heat waves in already fragile regions - Environmental fragility has increased significantly since 2022 in some contexts, e.g. climate-affected Madagascar

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Environmental stress often overlaps with hunger hotspots and conflict-affected commodity-dependent economies
Societal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Disinformation, youth marginalisation, polarisation - Growing social tensions, exclusion, displacement and gender-based violence - Political and societal fragility have increased in 107 of 177 contexts since 2015 - More than 126 million people forcibly displaced in 2023 (32.5% increase since 2021) - Over 100 million refugees and IDPs (approximately 80% of all forcibly displaced people) originate in high/extreme fragility contexts - High/extreme fragility contexts host 81 million forcibly displaced people (64% of global total), most displaced for more than five years
Human	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Overall improvements in basic services, with sharp setbacks in crisis/war-affected contexts - Human fragility has decreased in 135 of 177 contexts since 2015, including 17 of 18 extreme-fragility contexts - Largest improvements in human dimension: Sierra Leone, Iraq, Nigeria, Bangladesh - Setbacks in the human dimension most pronounced in DPRK, Venezuela and Libya (protracted humanitarian needs and conflict) - About 91% of people needing humanitarian assistance or protection live in high/extreme fragility contexts

Source: Elaborated by authors, sourced from OECD's State of Fragility report (2025)

Table 2. The 6 dimensions of fragility and 56 fragility indicators by the OECD

6 Dimensions of Fragility	56 Indicators	
Security	State control over territory Historical deaths from non-state conflict Attitude on violence against women Government cybersecurity capacity	Historical deaths from war Military spending (as % of GNI) Presence of criminal networks Refugees and IDPs from country of origin Rule of law
Economic	General government gross debt GDP per capita growth rate Regulatory quality Resource dependence Unemployment rate	Current account deficit Exchange rate volatility Financial inclusion Tax revenue Women's employment in non-agricultural sector
Political	Prevalence of clientelism Perception of corruption Judicial constraints on executive power Legislative constraints on executive power Arrest from online political content	Freedom from political killing and torture Restriction on political rights Size of regime support group Women's political empowerment
Environmental	Exposure to hazards Air quality Biodiversity and habitat Environment-related displacement Food supply adequacy Lack of adaptive capacity to climate change	Non-renewable resource crimes Share of electricity production from renewables Water stress Women's participation in UNFCCC delegations
Societal	Access to justice Urbanisation rate Exclusion by social group Forced displacement Income inequality	Interpersonal trust Media freedoms Participatory environment for CSOs Women's civil liberties
Human*	Access to basic water Access to immunisation services Adolescent birth rate Age dependency ratio Gender gap in secondary school enrolment	Human inequality Prevalence of stunting Primary school completion rate Social protection coverage Youth not in employment, education, or training (NEET)

*Note. *Human dimension was added in the 2025 OECD State of Fragility report, as the OECD evolves to include multi-dimensional fragility metrics.*

Source: Elaborated by authors, sourced from OECD's State of Fragility report (2025)

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