VOICE (Voluntary Organisations in Cooperation in Emergencies) is a network representing 85 non-governmental organisations (NGOs) active in humanitarian aid worldwide, which are based in 20 European countries. VOICE is the main NGO interlocutor with the European Union on emergency aid and disaster risk reduction and it promotes the values of humanitarian NGOs.

June 2016

VOICE 2016 General Assembly Resolution
HUMANITARIAN NGOS CALL FOR A BETTER EU RESPONSE TO REFUGEES AND MIGRANTS

In 2015, the EU has seen over 1 million people[i] arrive, mostly into Greece – but this is less than 10% of those fleeing Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan, and in the context of about 60 million displaced people worldwide[ii]. Whatever the reasons that push them on the road to exile, many have suffered intense hardship, violence, persecution and exploitation on their journeys and arrive with acute humanitarian needs. Many do not make it at all. Since 2014, at least 10,000 people are known to have died at sea[iii].

The EU has a comparatively high capacity to receive refugees, process asylum claims and provide protection. It remains the 2nd largest global economy and the biggest global humanitarian donor. Europe's own experiences of war and population displacement inspired the global norms and legal frameworks for the treatment of refugees. The EU's response today to refugees and displaced people is insufficiently guided by this or by the Lisbon Treaty values of solidarity, human rights and the rule of law.

As the flow of people arriving intensified during 2015, and the number of shipwrecks increased, the situation was characterised by a lack of leadership and an inadequate response. The European Commission (EC) put forward an EU Agenda on Migration in 2015, outlining a mechanism for relocation and resettlement, amongst other proposals. Member States took their own measures, tightening national legislation, closing borders and not delivering on the relocation and resettlement schemes. People on the move were faced with legal impasses, dire reception conditions and inadequate support, and too often violation of their rights. In contrast, European citizens responded with extraordinary solidarity and voluntary mobilization, while humanitarian NGOs maintained their commitment to supporting people in their countries of origin, transit and destination.

The imperative to **save lives** and reduce suffering is the most basic humanitarian value, but humanitarian aid is not a solution to the violence forcing people to flee.

The EU and its Member States must:

- show leadership to find political solutions to conflict, as the key root cause of displacement, and step up its role in conflict prevention.
- show greater commitment to respect and to promote respect for international law, international humanitarian law and refugee law.
- ensure that the EU's humanitarian assistance is not instrumentalised for political purposes in response to this crisis. It should go to the areas with the greatest need and not be linked to strategic decisions aimed at preventing migration to the EU.
- ensure effective search and rescue, independent of objectives of deterrence or border control.
- create credible and sufficient safe, legal and accessible mechanisms for those forced to flee, to prevent more lives being put at risk.
- further rely on their humanitarian NGO partners and their principled professional approach.
- ensure that protection is a priority in the current humanitarian funding on the refugee routes and in Greece.
- assess the added-value of new funding instruments with regard to flexibility, as well as timely and predictable delivery, and regarding programming and financial disbursements.

Humanitarian NGOs deliver assistance to meet basic **humanitarian needs** such as food, shelter and medical care. Since last autumn, they have stressed strongly that **protection** needs are particularly acute among those arriving in Europe. Women, children and vulnerable groups have specific needs and are particularly exposed to violence. Providing effective protection support has

proven difficult first because people were moving quickly, then because of the very quickly shifting legal environment[iv].

Greece has become a microcosm of the challenges facing refugees and migrants seeking sanctuary in Europe. The challenges faced by humanitarian NGOs in Greece are symptomatic of the broader European failures. Member States and governments have the first responsibility for the reception of asylum seekers, refugees and migrants, and treating people with dignity.

Funding is a clear challenge for NGOs. The instruments available to respond to this crisis within the EU did not support humanitarian response with the necessary speed, flexibility and predictability of funding disbursements[v]. NGOs relied mainly on their private funding in this response. By March 2016, a new instrument was finally adopted. This Emergency Support for Operations in Europe (ESOP)[vi] is implemented by the EC's Department for Humanitarian Assistance and Civil Protection (DG ECHO). Under the current conditions for emergency assistance in Greece, the funding available for protection is not sufficient to meet the level of protection needs. This presents a challenge and possible departure from the EU's new protection guidelines[vii] and usual policy on protection and humanitarian aid. **Protection should be a priority** in the current humanitarian funding on the refugee routes as well as in Greece.

Humanitarian NGOs have been working in Greece to meet basic needs. In such a challenging political setting, delivering needs-based **assistance in accordance with the humanitarian principles** (humanity, impartiality, independence and neutrality) is ever more important. Following the EU-Turkey deal[viii], conditions imposed in the hotspots meant effectively turning them into detention centres. NGOs were faced with reduced access, so protection and assistance activities could no longer be provided in an impartial, neutral and independent manner. Many VOICE members felt unable to continue working responsibly in such circumstances. While the ESOP is intended to be both needs-based and principled, the inconsistency in EU policy objectives in Greece makes this very difficult.

It is regrettable that after the EU-Turkey deal, humanitarian aid is associated with political crisis management**.** The overall policy priorities are not consistent with the objectives of the EU's emergency assistance, as stated in the European Consensus on Humanitarian Aid. It is essential to strive to **ensure that the EU's humanitarian assistance is not instrumentalised for political purposes** in response to these crises. The EU should further **rely on and support its humanitarian NGO partners** and their principled professional approach.

Many VOICE members work in humanitarian life-saving assistance and in long-term development of societies with a sustained commitment to local communities. The bulk of this work is **outside of the EU,** as this is where the majority of conflict displaced people live. This crisis has helped underline the need to step up the regional responses and answer to humanitarian needs in countries of origin and transit, particularly in Africa and the Middle East. The Madad and the Africa Trust funds, as well as the Turkey Facility, provide additional financial resources to respond to the needs of people and refugees outside of the EU. Humanitarian NGOs are increasingly concerned that, so far, these funds have mostly proven to be unpredictable, lack transparency and bypass established accountability mechanisms. While more funding is needed and welcome, it is essential to **ensure that the EU's humanitarian assistance goes to the areas with the greatest need** and is not linked to strategic decisions aimed at preventing migration to the EU. The EU should also **assess the added-value of these new funding instruments** with regard to flexibility, as well as timely and predictable delivery, programming and financial disbursements.

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[i] UNHCR regional data overview, Refugees/Migrants Emergency Response Mediterranean
[ii] UNHCR Global Trends 2014 report 'World at War'.
[iii] Statement on 7 June 2016, UNHCR spokesperson, UNHCR statistics for Refugee response in the Mediterranean.
[iv] Such as the new Greek law 4357/2016, border closures, EU-Turkey statement, 18 March 2016
[v] EU budgetary responses to the 'Refugee Crisis': reconfiguring the funding landscape, Leonhard den Hartog, Centre for European Policy Studies, May 2016
[vi] Council Regulation (EU) 2016/369, Emergency Support for Operations in Europe (ESOP)
[vii] EC Staff Working Document, Humanitarian Protection: Improving protection outcomes for people in humanitarian crises, May 2016.
[viii] EU-Turkey statement, 18 March 2016