

EU HUMANITARIAN AID IN THE NEW INSTITUTIONAL SETTING: RECOMMENDATIONS

VOICE 2015 General Assembly Resolution

Since November 2014, the EU High Representative/Vice President, as head of the European External Action Service (EEAS), is working more closely within the European Commission and leads a team of external relations Commissioners. These Commissioners deal with humanitarian aid and crisis management, diplomacy, development, human rights, protection and security, conflict prevention, trade, the EU neighbourhood and further address migration and climate change where relevant. There is also a clear drive from the Commission and EEAS for the EU's global role to be more visible.

There are many who welcome the fact that the EU now works towards a more coherent response. However, new working methods will take time to mature, and it will necessarily take time for the Commissioners to get an in-depth understanding for each other's mandates.

The majority of EU humanitarian assistance is being delivered in fragile states through NGOs, the UN and the Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement. As such, it is vital to ensure that EU humanitarian aid continues to be needs-based and delivered according to humanitarian principles. The European Consensus on Humanitarian Aid ('Consensus') is the main framework guaranteeing this. The Consensus makes clear that EU humanitarian aid has its own objectives: preserving lives, reducing human suffering and maintaining human dignity. Where and how humanitarian aid is delivered should be decided solely on the needs of affected populations, independent of political agendas and security concerns.

Humanitarian NGOs welcome the fact that the 2014 Communication on the Comprehensive Approach to external conflicts and crises, and its 2015 Action Plan, have taken many of our recommendations on board. A key point for humanitarian NGOs was the need for the Communication to recognise the principles of the Consensus, and in particular that humanitarian assistance is not, and should not be used as a crisis management tool.

In that context, and bearing in mind the need to ensure the security of humanitarian aid workers and their access to affected communities, VOICE stresses the following recommendations:

- 1. The EU should ensure that coordination between its institutions does not lead to a degree of integration that negatively affects humanitarian organisations as they seek to address the needs of crisis affected populations.**
- 2. The EU should ensure clarity of roles and mandates in crisis response and management and maintain a clear distinction between political, military and humanitarian actors.**
- 3. The EU should engage in systematic dialogue with NGOs and other actors to fully understand realities on the ground.**
- 4. EU external communication should differentiate between political and humanitarian action and actively promote an understanding of humanitarian principles.**

- 1. The EU should ensure that coordination between its institutions does not lead to a degree of integration that negatively affects humanitarian organisations as they seek to address the needs of crisis affected populations.**

EU foreign policy and external action has an increasing security focus. Ensuring more coherence in external action, by increasing coordination and joint planning, is potentially positive. It is important that the objectives of the various services are taken into account when developing common approaches to various crises. With the daunting challenges the EU faces regarding political solutions to conflicts and security issues, humanitarian assistance could easily become a substitute for political action and its objectives subordinated to other political intentions. The recent EU Regional Strategy on Syria and Iraq aims, *inter alia*, to combat terrorism and integrates humanitarian activities as part of this strategy. As a

result, the humanitarian imperative – to save lives and reduce suffering – risks being undermined if its specificity and distinction is not recognised and maintained. In future relevant country and regional strategies the needs-based nature of humanitarian aid should be made explicit. From a humanitarian perspective this is crucial to avoid putting humanitarian workers and crisis affected people at risk. This was the driving force for a number of NGOs engaging in the development of the regional Syria strategy.

2. The EU should ensure clarity of roles and mandates in crisis response and management and maintain a clear distinction between political, military and humanitarian actors.

Both the Commission and the EEAS have different services and tools for dealing with crises. DG ECHO has a humanitarian and a civil protection mandate. The High Representative is charged with coordinating and carrying out the EU's foreign, security and defence policy. The EEAS therefore also has a responsibility for crisis management and operational coordination. In addition there are EU military missions in a number of conflict affected countries such as Mali, CAR and Somalia. From the outside it can be difficult to see how these EU actors and services interlink and complement each other, but also how they are distinct from one another. The EU institutions should continue to work to clarify the mandates and roles of the different actors in crisis response and management. This would ensure that the lines between humanitarian assistance and other EU actions do not become blurred.

Equally, when there is an EU military mission in close proximity to humanitarian action, or when the use of military assets for a humanitarian response is planned, particular care has to be taken to ensure that the respective roles of the different actors are known and understood in line with the Oslo or MCDA guidelines. IHL training should be ensured and the respective roles of civilian, humanitarian and military actors should be spelt out. Moreover, any EU military involvement will have an impact on the operating environment, and this must be considered at an early stage so as to limit the negative impact of such interventions on other actors - including humanitarian organisations already operational on the ground.

3. The EU should engage in systematic dialogue with NGOs and other actors to fully understand realities on the ground.

Based on our operational experience, it is welcomed that the Comprehensive Approach acknowledges that strategies must be adapted to the specific crisis context. To ensure that humanitarian concerns are taken on board, the EU should engage in dialogue and/or systematic consultation with the relevant actors at all levels – including on the ground – when developing country or regional strategies. A forum for such dialogue should be considered as the EU elaborates its external actions. A regular review of progress in this area is necessary.

4. EU external communication should differentiate between political and humanitarian action and actively promote an understanding of humanitarian principles.

The current Commission has taken a new approach to external communication with an effort to cluster communication as much as possible, and it is keen to strengthen visibility.

In a globalized media world, what is communicated and published by the European institutions will also be seen and noted in the countries where the EU supports humanitarian aid. If EU humanitarian aid is perceived as a tool of one or more parties to a conflict, or as part of a counter-terrorism strategy, this can potentially have a devastating impact on the overall security situation for humanitarian organisations.

Crisis related communication by the EEAS has to play a role in building a positive understanding of humanitarian action and principles. Awareness of how this communication may impact on humanitarian settings is crucial for ensuring a clear distinction between political and/or security objectives on the one hand, and humanitarian objectives on the other. Guidance is required for all communications personnel, as well as EU delegations and diplomatic representatives. In their interactions with third countries and other relevant actors they should seek to implement the EU Guidelines on International Humanitarian Law and contribute to a better understanding of needs-based and principled EU humanitarian aid and its apolitical nature.

ⁱ Joint Communication on elements for an EU Regional Strategy for Syria and Iraq as well as the Da'esh Threat, 6.2.2015