

HUMANITARIAN AID AND THE EU COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH: RECOMMENDATIONS

VOICE 2013 General Assembly Resolution

The Lisbon Treaty and the establishment of the European External Action Service (EEAS) in 2010 have created opportunities for the EU to strengthen its foreign policy, and the role of the different portfolios in the delivery of that policy. The EU has now started a process that should lead to integrated strategies for its external action, called the '*comprehensive approach*'. A joint Communication on the EU Comprehensive Approach is currently being developed by the EEAS and the European Commission.

In doing so, they are joining a trend. Several EU Member States, including the UK, Sweden and the Netherlands, are already formalizing approaches which seek to integrate diplomacy, defense and development into one coordinated strategy. The UN has an 'integrated approach' to maximise the impact of its response in conflict and post-conflict situations where there is a multi-dimensional peacekeeping operation or political mission. NATO introduced the '*comprehensive approach*', involving not only military, but also political and civilian instruments, to contribute to stabilization and reconstruction.

These approaches seek to improve the effectiveness and coherence of policies, using multiple tools to advance a political and/or security objective. A comprehensive approach is not presented as a goal in itself, but it is about *how* policy is made and how resources are deployed abroad. Looking at the present variety of practices, it is clear that there are many different ways to embark on a '*comprehensive approach*'.

When developing an EU comprehensive approach, key questions include how broadly it is defined and whether- and where- humanitarian aid fits in to it. Linking humanitarian aid to political goals through an EU comprehensive approach is an issue of concern to the humanitarian community, particularly in complex crises, as it will make it more difficult for us to operate and to achieve our humanitarian mission. Therefore, the VOICE network recommends the following:

1. The EU Comprehensive Approach should respect Lisbon Treaty roles and competencies

The bulk of EU humanitarian assistance is being delivered in fragile states through NGOs, the UN and the Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement. Due to international security concerns, many of these countries are likely to become subject to the Comprehensive Approach. When the EEAS was established, Member States kept the humanitarian department of the European Commission outside the EEAS to ensure that EU humanitarian aid could continue to be needs-based and delivered according to humanitarian principles, especially in conflict zones and complex emergencies. This is in line with Lisbon Treaty article 214 which states that EU humanitarian aid "*shall be conducted in compliance with the principles of international law and with the principles of impartiality, neutrality and non-discrimination*".

2. The Communication on the Comprehensive Approach should reference the European Consensus on Humanitarian Aid, which Member States, the Commission and the Parliament have committed to

The European Consensus on Humanitarian Aid states that EU humanitarian aid is not a crisis management tool. Indeed, humanitarian aid has its own objective (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 and security concerns.

3. It is important that coordination does not lead to integration (in policy or practice) of EU humanitarian aid

Humanitarian actors seek to focus their operations in the areas where the needs of affected populations are highest. Access to these populations is dependent in part on how humanitarian actors are seen by the different (political, military and civilian) parties that influence or control access.

If perceived to be taking sides in a conflict, access to affected populations and the security of humanitarian workers may be jeopardised. For example, NGOs in Afghanistan and Pakistan still suffer the consequences from international militaries' use of aid programmes to 'win hearts and minds' of the population for security objectives, thereby blurring the lines of distinction between humanitarian and military actors.

While ensuring more coherence in external action by increasing coordination and having one strategy is positive, it is important that varying objectives are allowed within that strategy ('coordination *with*', rather than 'coordination *by*'). The humanitarian objective- to save lives and reduce suffering- should not be undermined by the inclusion of humanitarian action in a comprehensive approach.

4. Humanitarians should be included in the analysis from the start of common planning. Any strategy must be adapted to the crisis context.

Common analysis is important, and the current EU institutional arrangement with a crisis platform has already led to better planning and coordination between the different departments involved in crisis response and management. This strength in analysis should contribute to ensuring that strategies towards complex crises take into account the specificities of each particular situation, and avoid a 'one size fits all' approach.

When developing the comprehensive approach, it is essential that the EU builds on lessons learned of other 'comprehensive approaches', while maintaining sufficient flexibility to be able to adapt the use of different EU instruments and their coordination to different and changing circumstances.

A particularly difficult situation will appear when it is decided to embark on an EU military mission within the comprehensive approach, or when the EU would want to use military assets for a humanitarian response. In that case, as appropriate to the context, the Oslo or MCDA guidelines should be respected. Moreover, any EU military involvement will have an impact on the operating environment, for the reasons of perception explained above, 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.

5. EU communications on external action should respect the specificity of humanitarian aid

EU public communications on external action should take care to be in line with the European Consensus on Humanitarian Aid. This means ensuring that a clear distinction is maintained in all communications between political and/or security objectives on the one hand, and humanitarian ones on the other. This will avoid a negative impact on the way humanitarian actors are perceived. EU delegations and diplomatic representatives should also take this point into account, given that they are in charge of all EU affairs within their designated country.

In addition, the EU should continue to increase understanding of International Humanitarian Law (IHL) in interactions with third countries, non-state armed groups and armed forces that receive EU funding, in line with EU Guidelines on IHL. In so doing, the apolitical nature of humanitarian aid needs to be stressed to help to create space for humanitarian action to be carried out.

As the leading donor of humanitarian aid worldwide, the EU has a particular responsibility to ensure that it constantly follows a principled approach in all decision making. If applied, these recommendations will further strengthen the EU's standing as a principled donor.