



VOICE

European humanitarian NGOs.
Standing together.

ANNUAL REPORT 2023



**ANNUAL
REPORT**

2023

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Editorial.....	5
Facts & figures.....	7
1. Navigating European humanitarian aid: VOICE engagement with EU institutions and beyond.....	8
2. Fostering a quality partnership between DG ECHO and its NGO partners.....	12
3. Navigating the intersection of the Humanitarian-Development-Peace nexus and climate action.....	15
4. Advocating for the protection of humanitarian aid from the impacts of EU sanctions and counter-terrorism measures	18
5. Amplifying funding and diversifying support for humanitarian aid.....	20
6. Life of the VOICE network.....	23



OVERALL VISION:

A collective voice of European NGOs promoting principled and people-centred humanitarian aid.



MISSION (Art 4 VOICE Statutes)

VOICE's aim is to improve the general quality and effectiveness of humanitarian aid notably that of the European Union and its Member States as well as of the wider humanitarian community. The network also promotes the added value of NGOs given their key role as humanitarian deliverers and as an expression of EU public solidarity.



STRATEGIC PLAN OBJECTIVES 2019-2023

1. Shape EU policies and practices affecting the delivery of principled humanitarian assistance worldwide, building on NGOs' operational expertise.
2. Build on effective partnerships to advocate for predictable, timely and increased resourcing at EU level for quality and accountable humanitarian aid.
3. Promote an enabling environment in which European NGOs are able to advocate for and deliver effective humanitarian aid.
4. Enhance the effectiveness and recognition of VOICE as the main NGO interlocutor on EU humanitarian aid.



At the time of writing this editorial in early 2024, the conflict in Gaza has been raging for more than six months. During this time, conditions have rapidly deteriorated, pushing the enclave to the brink of a humanitarian catastrophe. The dire circumstances and unprecedented breaches of International Humanitarian Law (IHL) underscore the importance of respecting the fundamental humanitarian principles and IHL, allowing for the unimpeded

delivery of humanitarian aid, protection of civilians and humanitarian workers, and the restoration of essential services in the Gaza Strip. This serves as a reminder of the essential role of humanitarian non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and humanitarian workers, including VOICE members, who stand at the forefront of efforts to bring relief and support to the most vulnerable in the harshest possible conditions.

The humanitarian context at the start of 2024 includes the complexities of conflict, climate shocks, and economic uncertainties. In recent years, the scale of global humanitarian needs has escalated to unprecedented levels. Close to 300 million people across various continents will require urgent assistance and protection in 2024 and beyond ([GHO 2024](#)). The landscape of needs is vast, starting with the disturbing situation in Gaza and stretching to the intensifying crisis in Sudan, where the number of people in distress has doubled in a short time to 30 million people. Humanitarian crises are worsening in the persistent turmoil across Burkina Faso, Niger, Syria, Afghanistan, and Venezuela, as well as the ongoing conflict in Ukraine and many other protracted, and far too often neglected, crises.

While the challenges for the humanitarian sector remain high at the start of 2024, looking back at 2023, VOICE steadfastly navigated the complexities of European humanitarian aid, reinforcing its pivotal role within the European Union's humanitarian ecosystem as the leading network of European humanitarian NGOs. Engaging actively with the Swedish and Spanish Presidencies of the Council of the European Union, VOICE not only shaped the discourse but also laid the foundation for meaningful collaboration with the upcoming Belgian Presidency. In 2023, VOICE continued to be actively involved in shaping the agenda of the European Humanitarian Forum. Through strategic advocacy and collaboration, our organisation ensured that the voices of its members and those of the vulnerable communities they work with were heard at the highest levels, driving forward the principled humanitarian agenda.

In 2023, VOICE intensified its efforts to solidify the partnerships between the Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (DG ECHO) and its NGO partners. Central to this aim was the strategic steering of the Humanitarian Partnership Watch Group, which served not just as a bridge to facilitate exchanges but also as an advocate for the collective interests and operational needs of DG ECHO's certified NGO partners.

Over the year, VOICE delved deeper into discussions on the Humanitarian-Development-Peace (HDP) nexus and climate action, areas increasingly recognised as vital for the sustainability of humanitarian efforts. The Resilience-Nexus Working Group embraced an innovative approach to this intersection, with the adoption of new Terms of Reference and the creation of two strategic sub-working groups on climate and Nexus.

VOICE consolidated its advocacy efforts to protect humanitarian aid from the consequences of sanctions and counter-terrorism measures. Following the momentum created by the United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 2664, VOICE played a key role in advocating for significant advancements at the EU level, including the adoption of humanitarian exemptions in various EU autonomous sanctions regimes.

On another note, with the revision of the multiannual financial framework (MFF) and the negotiations ahead of the annual budget for 2024, the VOICE Secretariat was involved in crucial efforts to amplify funding and diversify support for humanitarian aid, addressing the widening gap between growing needs and available resources. Through ongoing dialogue with the European Commission, particularly the Directorate-General on Budgets (DG BUDG), and with Members of the European Parliament (MEPs), VOICE championed the call for greater investment in humanitarian action. Additionally, VOICE's engagement at the national level, supported by the efforts of its member organisations, was instrumental in advocating for a broader humanitarian donor base.

The VOICE network was further consolidated when it welcomed three new members in 2023: Ayuda en Acción Spain, HIAS Europe, and Relief International France. VOICE implemented additional communication approaches to reach new target groups. The network organised events that fostered dialogue and debate on crucial humanitarian issues, including the role of women in the response to the global food crisis and the future of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in humanitarian action. This solidified VOICE's position as the leading voice in the humanitarian community at the EU level. The commitment and contribution of the VOICE Board of Directors, including the VOICE President, and the dedication of the Secretariat team were instrumental in guiding the network through a year of challenges, changes, and achievements.

With a strong foundation laid down in 2023, VOICE is ready to continue its vital work in 2024, championing the fundamental principles of humanitarian action, enhancing collaboration among its members, building bridges with networks from the Global North and South, representing the voice of its members in Brussels, and advocating for people in need around the world.

Maria Groenewald
VOICE Director

VOICE FACTS AND FIGURES 2023

- 89** members in 19 EU countries
- 1.362** people participated in VOICE activities
- 35** Working Group, Watch Group, and Task Force meetings
- 4** VOICE public events
- 38** VOICE members' meetings

FOR MEMBERS:

- 12** Flash newsletters

A dedicated area of the website, the Members' Room, with exclusive advocacy news and briefings

FOR EVERYONE:

- 3** VOICE at Work newsletters

LinkedIn and X, formerly Twitter, accounts with the latest humanitarian updates

VOICE Members' Meeting with DG ECHO's Acting Director E Mihela Zupancic Magovac

VOICE Members' workshop on the operationalisation of DG ECHO's Equitable Partnerships Guidance Note

VOICE country exchanges on Afghanistan, Haiti, Liberia, Mali, Sudan, and Venezuela, as well as VOICE policy exchanges on the protection of aid workers and on the power of narratives in influencing policymakers

Dedicated spaces in the VOICE website with news and statements from members on the Türkiye - Syria earthquake response, the crisis in the Gaza Strip, and COP28

VOICE PUBLICATIONS:

VOICE Out Loud 35 - Localisation: Exploring a multifaceted agenda

VOICE Out Loud 36 - From crisis to recovery: women's role in humanitarian action

VOICE Policy Resolution 2023 - World hunger is rising sharply: let's stop it NOW!

Fighting hunger: a women-led response - VOICE key highlights

VOICE - La Coordinadora roundtable in Madrid "Neglected crises: from commitments to actions" - VOICE key highlights

VOICE Reflections after the European Humanitarian Forum 2023



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1

Navigating
European
humanitarian aid:
VOICE
engagement
with EU institutions
and beyond

ENGAGING WITH THE COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

In 2023, VOICE maintained a high level of engagement towards the Swedish and Spanish Presidencies of the Council of the European Union (EU) – the latter taking up its Presidency ahead of Belgium and Hungary in the new trio. Thanks to the good collaboration created with the Swedish representatives, VOICE presented its initial reflections on the European Humanitarian Forum (EHF) 2023 at the Working Party on Humanitarian Aid and Food Aid (CO-HAFA) meeting in April. This triggered reflections among Member States’ representatives on the EHF, co-hosted by Sweden and the Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (DG ECHO). VOICE followed up closely and analysed the [Council’s conclusions on addressing the humanitarian aid funding gap](#), approved under the Swedish Presidency.

During the Spanish Presidency in the second half of 2023, VOICE – together with La Coordinadora, the Spanish national platform of civil society organisations (CSOs) for humanitarian and development issues – co-organised the roundtable *“Neglected crises: from commitments to actions”* in September in Madrid. The meeting brought together around 60 people and welcomed a variety of experts. Some of the questions raised during the roundtable included: How to address the funding imbalances and expand the donor base? What is the role of local actors, especially women, in humanitarian responses? How should the nexus approach be used to address neglected, protracted, and complex crises? Following the meeting, the Secretariat published the VOICE key highlights: [“VOICE - La Coordinadora roundtable in Madrid “Neglected crises: from commitments to actions”](#).

In preparation for the Belgian Presidency in January 2024, VOICE strengthened its close collaboration with some Belgian humanitarian non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to provide input on humanitarian priorities.



VOICE - La Coordinadora roundtable in Madrid “Neglected crises: from commitments to actions” – Key highlights

STRENGTHENING RELATIONSHIPS WITH THE COMMISSION AND COMMISSIONER JANEZ LENARČIČ ON HUMANITARIAN AID

Maintaining a high-level dialogue with DG ECHO remained very high on VOICE’s agenda in 2023. After Maciej Popowski was appointed as the new Director-General of DG ECHO in March 2023, VOICE met him twice over the course of the year, establishing the basis for a constructive and high-quality working relationship. In addition, regular exchanges with Commissioner Lenarčič’s cabinet continued throughout the year, as well as with the Deputy Director-General, Michael Köhler.

In addition to bilateral exchanges, VOICE worked hard to create space for inclusive dialogue between its members and DG ECHO’s management. VOICE also supported the organisation of a Question and Answer (Q&A) session with Commissioner Lenarčič during the first-ever DG ECHO Partners’ Segment. As part of the VOICE General Assembly, VOICE held a one-hour exchange with Ms Mihela Zupancic, who was then Acting Director E of DG ECHO.



Dominic Crowley, VOICE President, during the exchange with MEPs at DEVE

RAISING AWARENESS OF HUMANITARIAN NEEDS IN THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

In March 2023, VOICE President Dominic Crowley was invited to participate in an exchange of views with Members of the European Parliament’s (MEPs) Committee on Development (DEVE), which also works on humanitarian aid topics. The VOICE President presented an overview of the current challenges and opportunities when it comes to humanitarian aid. This exchange took place in the context of VOICE’s mandate to intervene in the DEVE Committee every year.

VOICE was invited to coordinate the consultation of NGOs organised on the drafting of the own-initiative report on *“How to build an innovative humanitarian aid strategy: spotlight on current and forgotten crises”* under the lead of the Standing Rapporteur for Humanitarian Aid MEP Carlos Zorrinho. The Secretariat presented joint recommendations to the rapporteur in collaboration with several VOICE members.

Throughout the year, thanks to the excellent collaboration with the Secretariat of the DEVE Committee, the VOICE Secretariat managed to

secure the participation of several of its member organisations in exchanges of views with MEPs. VOICE engaged in bilateral meetings with MEPs and their assistants, as well as with political advisors from different political groups engaging in the work of the DEVE Committee.

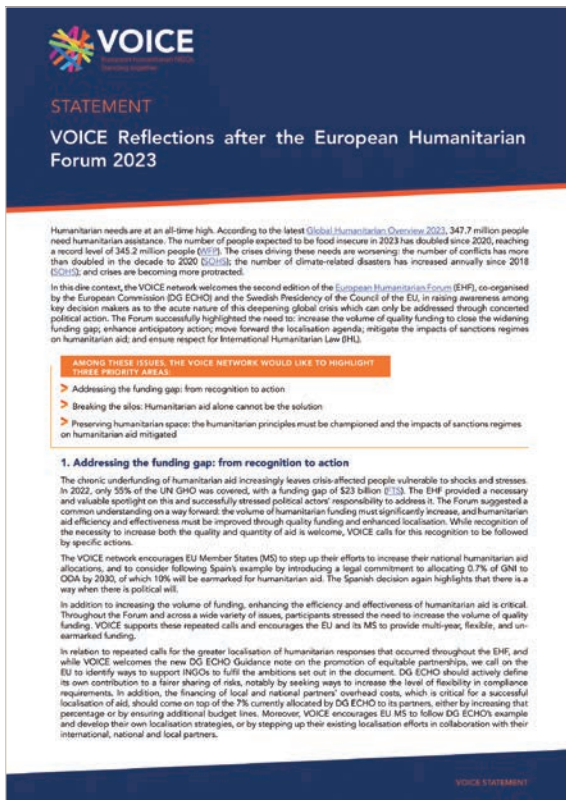
ACTIVELY PARTICIPATING IN KEY FORA AND NETWORKING OPPORTUNITIES

In addition to taking part in the DG ECHO-led EHF Partners’ Task Force, VOICE actively engaged before, during, and after the second edition of the European Humanitarian Forum co-organised by the European Commission (DG ECHO) and the Swedish Presidency of the Council of the EU, which took place in March 2023. During the event, VOICE President Dominic Crowley participated in the high-level panel *“Localisation: The guidance on the promotion of equal partnerships with local responders”*. He welcomed the Localisation Guidance that had been recently published by DG ECHO and called on donors to ensure an enabling environment for the development of equitable partnerships. VOICE Board member Fie Lauritzen was part of the high-level panel on the Donors’

Declaration and Climate Charter, which was convened to discuss the implementation of the Donors' Declaration one year after its launch at the EHF 2022.

Following the event, the network's key messages on the EHF were disseminated through the statement [“VOICE Reflections after the European Humanitarian Forum 2023”](#), which outlined three priority areas:

- Addressing the funding gap: From recognition to action.
- Breaking the silos: Humanitarian aid alone cannot be the solution.
- Preserving humanitarian space: The humanitarian principles must be championed and the impacts of sanctions regimes on humanitarian aid must be mitigated.



VOICE Reflections after the European Humanitarian Forum 2023

VOICE was invited to speak at several high-level panels. VOICE President, Dominic Crowley, participated in the Slovenia Humanitarian Forum in Ljubljana and was among the speakers of the panel *“Humanitarian aid between needs and resources: How to respond in a faster,*

more effective, comprehensive and preventive way?” together with Janez Lenarčič, European Commissioner for Crisis Management. Dominic Crowley presented VOICE’s perspectives on the importance of increasing humanitarian funding as well as improving efficiency and effectiveness in humanitarian aid. The EU and its Member States have a key role to play since political will is essential to help catalyse change.

VOICE Board member Ruth Watson attended the Ambrela Development Forum in Bratislava and spoke at the panel on unlocking efficiency through flexible and innovative funding. Fellow Board member Edouard Rodier spoke at the XII COOPI Conference *“Complexity in the Present and Future of International Cooperation”*. In addition, VOICE participated in the 6th National Humanitarian Conference of France, which was held in Paris.

VOICE took part in the International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA) Conference for NGO networks in Rome and the INTERSOS Humanitarian Congress *“Navigating war, politics and exploding needs through principled humanitarian action”* to keep alive the good working relationships with peer networks, members, and like-minded organisations.



2

Fostering a quality
partnership
between DG
ECHO and its
NGO partners

THE HUMANITARIAN PARTNERSHIP WATCH GROUP

Since 1999, the VOICE Secretariat has been facilitating the Humanitarian Partnership (HP) Watch Group, previously called FPA Watch Group. Bringing together a substantial number of DG ECHO partners, the working group is a unique dialogue platform between DG ECHO and its certified NGO partners. Thanks to the HP Watch Group, including its Task Force, VOICE worked throughout the year to defend the interests of all DG ECHO NGO partners, engaging on a variety of topics.

A dialogue platform between DG ECHO and NGO partners

In 2023, the HP Watch Group met four times. All meetings included exchanges with DG ECHO on topics of interest and concern for NGO partners. The group met DG ECHO's audit team on several occasions to discuss the consequences of DG ECHO's new audit strategy, including the main issues encountered by partners related to audits. Among other issues, the corrective measures foreseen by DG ECHO to tackle the issue of the high error rate were discussed.

Another topic of discussion with DG ECHO over the year was the operationalisation of the [DG ECHO Guidance note on Promoting Equitable Partnerships with Local Responders in Humanitarian Settings](#). The main elements raised by the HP Watch Group pertained to DG ECHO's engagement with local and national actors in the Humanitarian Implementation Plans (HIPs) consultations, compliance requirements, overhead cost sharing, budget implications, and changes in the Single Form. In addition to HP Watch Group meetings, the dialogue with DG ECHO was reinforced by the work of the HP Task Force all year round.

A collective and evidence-based voice at the EU level

The HP Watch Group constitutes a hub for the exchange of information and expertise between peer organisations. During each HP Watch Group meeting, some time was reserved for internal discussions and collective brainstorming. The result of these exchanges established the basis for the continuation of the Watch Group's work on topics of interest. With

the creation of the HP Watch Group Teams' chat, the group was offered a collaborative space to improve the sharing of information on practical issues related to the partnership.

To facilitate the advancement of specific objectives, HP sub-working groups were created. The HP sub-working group on Sexual Exploitation, Abuse, and Harassment (SEAH) continued its efforts to engage with DG ECHO to provide feedback on the yearly SEAH reporting template and to influence DG ECHO's approach to safeguarding. In October, the HP sub-working group on the sharing of overheads with local partners kick-started, providing a platform for Watch Group members to share good practices and set collective objectives, in the context of DG ECHO-funded projects.

To ensure that the asks of the group were evidence-based and built on collective feedback, different tools were used throughout the year to collect inputs and develop joint analyses. The HP Task Force continued its work to monitor the average timeline of the HIPs contracting process. In addition, the HP Watch Group ran a survey to gather evidence on partners' experience with the HIPs 2023, providing DG ECHO with practical suggestions to improve the HIPs consultation and negotiation phases, Multi-Year Funding, Programmatic Partnerships, and the Minimum Environmental Requirements.

VOICE ENGAGEMENT ON DG ECHO'S EQUITABLE PARTNERSHIPS GUIDANCE

Beyond the work of the HP Watch Group on the operationalisation of DG ECHO's Equitable Partnerships' Guidance Note, VOICE engaged intensely in influencing its drafting. At the beginning of the year, DG ECHO launched a two-week consultation on its draft Localisation Guidance Note. As part of the group targeted by DG ECHO to provide feedback on the draft document, VOICE led an in-depth consultation with its members to build collective input. The process included the gathering of VOICE members' written feedback, as well as a members' webinar. VOICE subsequently participated in DG ECHO's feedback session, where DG ECHO outlined to participating international non-governmental organisation (INGO) partners the overall feedback gathered and

how inputs from partners were received and integrated into the guidance.

Discussions on the guidance continued in June, during a workshop at the VOICE General Assembly. The objective of this exchange was to offer a space for VOICE members to share challenges and best practices in relation to the guidance, as well as to identify collectively the main problematic areas for its implementation. The most challenging areas identified were the lack of long-term funding modalities to build empowering partnerships, overhead cost sharing, due diligence requirements and risk sharing.

DG ECHO PARTNERS' SEGMENT

The first-ever DG ECHO Partners' Segment took place on 22 March 2023 in the form of a one-morning, in-person exchange for DG ECHO partners. Thanks to the intense advocacy work of VOICE and its members, after three years without the Partners' Conference, DG ECHO reinstated this exchange. The Partners' Segment was designed as one of the two yearly key moments to replace the former Conference, in addition to a strategic exchange in the autumn. The day provided exclusive space to DG ECHO and its partners to engage in operational and technical discussions to enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of the EU Humanitarian Partnership. Discussions took place specifically around DG ECHO's Minimum Environmental Requirements, Quality Funding and Equitable Partnerships. A Q&A session with Commissioner Lenarčič afforded the opportunity to receive first-hand answers about the European Commission's approach to Humanitarian Aid.



Dominic Crowley, VOICE President, at the Partners' Segment 2023

VOICE played an active role in co-organising the workshop on Quality Funding during the Partners' Segment, which looked at the operationalisation of the objectives set out in the Grand Bargain Caucus on Quality Funding Outcome Document. In particular, the exchange focused on multi-year funding, as well as the contribution of the Programmatic Partnership to DG ECHO's overall commitment towards enhancing quality funding. Following the event, the HP Watch Group gathered its recommendations on the Partners' Segment, suggesting DG ECHO should adapt the format for more inclusive and participative discussions. Towards the end of the year, VOICE submitted a proposal to DG ECHO for a workshop at the Partners' Segment 2024 on equitable partnerships and fairer risk sharing, which was later approved.

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3

Navigating the intersection of the Humanitarian-Development-Peace nexus and climate action

A RENEWED AND ENGAGED WORKING GROUP

In 2023, the [Resilience-Nexus Working Group](#) adopted new Terms of Reference from June 2023 to June 2025 and established a workplan to align the group's formal mandate with the members' expectations to focus on climate and the Humanitarian-Development-Peace (HDP) nexus. The group unanimously agreed it would deepen its expertise on prevention and resilience-building measures to crises, in particular Anticipatory Action. At the same time, it renewed its commitment towards helping to move forward the operationalisation of the HDP nexus approaches of the EU and its Member States, based on its long-standing expertise on the topic.

The Working Group met three times in 2023. Members had the opportunity to exchange both internally and with external speakers, including high-level stakeholders, such as DG ECHO and [Climate Action Network Europe](#) (CAN Europe).

During the year, the group piloted a new way of working. Two sub-working groups on the HDP nexus and climate were established to advance the work of the group strategically on the two different, but also interconnected, working areas. The Working Group served as a community of practice, offering a platform for members to share relevant publications, events, and information among peer organisations.

JOINT ADVOCACY ON THE HUMANITARIAN-DEVELOPMENT-PEACE NEXUS

The European Commission's study *"HDP Nexus: Challenges and Opportunities for its Implementation"*, for which the Resilience-Nexus Working Group was consulted twice in 2022, was published in May 2023. After the publication, VOICE prepared an internal analysis and exchanged with the consultant, the European NGO Confederation for Relief and Development (CONCORD), and the European Peacebuilding Liaison Office (EPLO) on the study's final recommendations. Overall, the recommendations were well received by the group. Members appreciated the attention paid to the concerns related to the introduction of the peace component in the HDP nexus and the focus both on opportunities and challenges of the approach. However, VOICE recommended that the study should include more case studies from INGOs, as well as

making specific suggestions on the changes the European Commission services need to make to implement the HDP nexus.

In the meantime, the Working Group was solicited for another consultation around the Directorate-General for Internal Partnerships (DG INTPA) study. This focused on how to improve the implementation of the nexus in practice in terms of food security-related actions in conflict-affected contexts in Africa to provide a humanitarian perspective on the topic.

In the framework of the [Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument \(NDICI\) mid-term evaluation](#) and as part of its workplan, the Working Group produced an internal note for members on the use of the Rapid Response Pillar of the NDICI instrument. Since this component references nexus and resilience programming, this internal note provided key messages that members planning to submit input to the NDICI mid-term evaluation were invited to use. The document was shared with CONCORD and its members to amplify the messages even further.

The VOICE Secretariat actively engaged in advocacy efforts at the institutional level through regular meetings with DG ECHO, DG INTPA, and by establishing new contacts with key stakeholders at the European External Action Service (EEAS). This was carried out in close collaboration with other peer networks, mainly CONCORD and EPLO, and it aimed to move forward an operationalisation of the HDP nexus in line with humanitarian principles.

HUMANITARIAN AID NGOS' KEY ROLE IN CLIMATE ISSUES

Thanks to the expertise of members of the Resilience-Nexus sub-working group on climate, in November VOICE organised a webinar for all members on Anticipatory Action. VOICE members' expertise on Anticipatory Action and its added value was shared, based on concrete programmatic examples. This helped VOICE members who were less familiar with the topic to learn more about the issues at stake and to identify the next steps for joint advocacy work.

In line with its plan to boost its work on climate, the Resilience-Nexus Working Group had an exchange with a representative of CAN Europe ahead of the Conference of the Parties 28

(COP28) to discuss the humanitarian sector's engagement in the COP. It was a key moment to reflect on the connection between the humanitarian and climate sectors and to establish valuable collaboration among different actors.

The VOICE Secretariat created an information hub on VOICE members' engagement around COP28 through a [dedicated web page on the](#)

[VOICE website](#). Several VOICE members were active in making sure the voices of humanitarian NGOs were heard in the discussions. Members' statements and events about COP28 were gathered in this information hub.

These activities marked a significant step forward for the development of common messages on climate from a humanitarian perspective.

The humanitarian call to stop the rise of world hunger

VOICE POLICY RESOLUTION 2023

Following its approval during the General Assembly, VOICE launched the [VOICE Policy Resolution 2023 "World hunger is rising sharply: let's stop it NOW!"](#) to call on donors to act and break the global hunger paradigm.

The objective of the Policy Resolution was to stress the need to act quickly to prevent the alarming increase in famine rates and to protect food and nutrition security. It emphasised the inadequacy of the current global food system. The Policy Resolution included a series of recommendations for the EU and its Member States to stop the steep rise of world hunger.



VOICE Policy Resolution 2023

FIGHTING HUNGER: A WOMEN-LED RESPONSE

VOICE engaged further on the topic of hunger from a humanitarian perspective and organised one of its two yearly events around this concern. Questions included: How can humanitarian practitioners and donors help to create an enabling environment for local women so that they can play a leading role in the hunger crisis response? What are the current obstacles to doing so, and how can we overcome them? In June, the VOICE event "Fighting hunger: a women-led response" addressed these questions by looking at the role of women in the fight against hunger worldwide. The [VOICE key highlights](#) of the event were published later in the year.



VOICE event 'Fighting hunger: a women-led response' – Key highlights

4

Advocating
for the protection
of humanitarian
aid from the
impacts of EU
sanctions and
counter-terrorism
measures

Following the historical catalyst from the UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 2664, 2023 saw significant positive developments at the EU level to improve the protection of humanitarian aid from the impacts of EU sanctions and counterterrorism measures.

At the beginning of the year, the EU transposed UNSCR 2664 into its UN sanctions regimes and so-called mixed regimes. This initial step was followed by the adoption of humanitarian exemptions in various EU autonomous sanctions regimes, including in Syria, Niger, and Sudan. In November 2023, the Council announced the introduction of humanitarian exemptions in an additional ten existing EU restrictive measures.

Throughout 2023, VOICE and its members strongly advocated for the EU to follow the approach set out by UNSCR 2664. Their role in achieving these positive developments was critical. However, despite the significant progress made, humanitarian safeguards are still provided on a case-by-case basis in EU autonomous sanctions regimes. This means that the way humanitarian aid is protected in the various EU autonomous regimes varies widely. While some benefit from a robust humanitarian exemption aligned with the spirit of UNSCR 2664, others only provide the possibility of derogations that are unsuitable for emergency settings, some exemptions are time-bound, and some do not offer any humanitarian safeguards at all.

VOICE and its members continued to highlight that this inconsistency not only fails to provide adequate protection for humanitarian actors but also leads to a significant amount of complexity and legal uncertainty for both humanitarian actors and the private sector, including banks.

To support information sharing and joint advocacy, VOICE created a members' informal group of exchange on sanctions. The group supported VOICE's engagement in various key advocacy activities on the topic.

Notably, in September 2023, VOICE Director Maria Groenewald, together with NGO members Caritas EU and ACF Spain, participated in the Council of the EU's Working Party of Foreign Relations Counsellors (RELEX) meeting to present VOICE's messages on the impacts of sanctions and humanitarian exemptions. The meeting was an ideal opportunity to bring

the humanitarian perspective to the Council Working Party in charge of sanctions by highlighting the need for a standing humanitarian exemption to ensure the effective and timely delivery of humanitarian aid. It was another occasion to build on the momentum created by the adoption of the landmark UNSCR 2664 and to advocate for the EU to follow the same approach.

In June and October 2023, VOICE advocated for the renewal of the humanitarian exemption in the EU Syria sanctions regime, by leading the drafting and dissemination of a private letter to key decision-makers, signed by 31 humanitarian organisations, including many VOICE members.

Beyond advocating for the protection of humanitarian aid from the impacts of restrictive measures, VOICE advocated intensely throughout the legislative procedure for the inclusion of a humanitarian exemption in the EU Directive on the definition of criminal offences and penalties for the violation of Union restrictive measures. This engagement included the sharing of a call to action for VOICE members to share advocacy messages at the national level, close collaboration with key MEPs, as well as Maria Groenewald's intervention in a European Parliament Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs (LIBE) Shadow Meeting.

Last but not least, the socialisation of UNSCR 2664 is key to its effective implementation. VOICE contributed to those efforts by organising a VOICE members' exchange on the impacts of UNSCR 2664 in the EU, in collaboration with the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) mission to the EU.



5

Amplifying funding
and diversifying
support for
humanitarian aid

EU BUDGET

In 2023, the EU witnessed two significant budgetary procedures: one focused on establishing the budget for 2024, and the other aimed at revising the EU's long-term budget, known as the multiannual financial framework (MFF). The revision of the MFF was prompted by its inability to adequately address the EU's financial goals, exacerbated by unforeseen expenses arising since the beginning of the MFF period. These expenses included the enduring impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and the conflict in Ukraine. Scheduled to take effect from 2024 onwards, the MFF revision was closely intertwined with the annual budget procedure for 2024.

The VOICE Secretariat engaged in advocacy efforts to ensure an increase in the humanitarian budget during both procedures, collaborating with members, other humanitarian actors, and NGOs working in related fields.

Collaboration with the European Commission

Prior to the publication of the European Commission's proposal, VOICE liaised with the European Commission's Directorate-General on Budgets (DG BUDG), emphasising the urgent need for enhanced humanitarian budgeting in the coming years. Throughout the year, VOICE maintained excellent collaboration with colleagues from DG ECHO, whose insights into the intricacies of the EU's humanitarian budget were very helpful.

Strong support from the European Parliament



Francesca Giubilo, VOICE Senior Advocacy Officer and VOICE Director ad interim from February to mid-May 2023, at BUDG Committee in March 2023

During the procedure, VOICE received strong support from the European Parliament, particularly from the DEVE Committee. This committee submitted proposals aligned with VOICE's advocacy messages on both the MFF revision and the 2024 annual budget. The Committee on Budgets demonstrated support, proposing increases directly for humanitarian funding or in complementary emergency funding. VOICE would like to take this opportunity to express gratitude to both committees and their Secretariats for their invitations to discuss humanitarian funding in various exchanges of views with MEPs.

The VOICE intervention in the Committee on Budgets (BUDG) was a welcome opportunity to highlight to MEPs the scale of the humanitarian funding gap and to share recommendations for action at the EU level. These included an increase in the humanitarian budget line on the revision of the EU's long-term budget as well as the ongoing annual budget procedure. These messages were further discussed with some members of the DEVE Committee and the Committee of Foreign Affairs (AFET), when VOICE was invited to detail its recommendations for the budgetary procedure establishing the EU budget 2024. The Secretariats of the Committees, the rapporteurs for the MFF revision, the rapporteurs for the annual budget procedure, as well as the Standing Rapporteur for Humanitarian Aid, MEP Carlos Zorrinho, provided invaluable assistance in facilitating these discussions.

Joint efforts towards the Member States

Drawing on the collaboration of member organisations spanning various Member States, the VOICE Secretariat engaged in advocacy efforts at the national level, recognising the Council's significant influence on both procedures. VOICE would like to acknowledge the support of national NGO networks, many of which helped to disseminate advocacy messages to different national stakeholders. These efforts were supplemented by numerous bilateral meetings with national officials responsible for humanitarian aid and budgetary affairs.

Internal information sharing

The VOICE Secretariat organised several member-exclusive information-sharing opportunities in 2023. This included the webinar on *“How to influence the EU budget at the national level”*, working group meetings, as well as briefings on the structure and implementation of the EU’s funding instruments relevant to humanitarian aid. Beyond this intra-network cooperation, endeavours with other like-minded organisations culminated in the publication of four different position papers and letters on external funding within the MFF 2021 to 2027.

INCREASING THE HUMANITARIAN DONOR BASE

VOICE engaged in conversations and advocacy efforts around the need to enlarge the humanitarian donor base, either through dedicated opportunities or concurrently with the above-mentioned advocacy on the EU budgetary procedures. VOICE Director Maria Groenewald spoke in an expert-level brainstorming session organised by DG ECHO. The publication of Council conclusions on addressing the humanitarian funding gap in May 2023, along with the encouraging messages they conveyed, marked a significant step forward on this issue.



6

Life of the VOICE network

VOICE MEMBERSHIP

In 2023, VOICE welcomed three new members: Ayuda en Acción Spain, HIAS Europe, based in Belgium, and Relief International France. In addition to enlarging the diversity of the network, this brought the total number of members to its highest-ever level – with 89 members from 19 European countries implementing humanitarian action [across 128 countries worldwide](#).

For the second time, the VOICE Secretariat organised an onboarding session for new member organisations in September 2023, which was opened to all new colleagues from the VOICE membership that were interested in learning about how the network works. Fourteen colleagues from nine member organisations attended the session.

The regular overview of the VOICE membership presented to the Board of Directors showed that, while VOICE has members in 19 EU countries, 63% of the membership is concentrated in six countries – namely Germany, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Denmark, and Spain with between thirteen and six members in each country. This overview reflects the spread of DG ECHO NGO partners throughout the EU: 64% of DG ECHO's certified partners are from the same six countries. Even though it would be ideal to extend the number of EU countries where VOICE has members, particularly in Eastern and Central Europe, the potential is limited because there are not many humanitarian NGOs. For example, DG ECHO has only four certified NGO partners in Eastern and Central Europe.

Although it is not a membership criterion, 89% of all VOICE members are certified as DG ECHO's Humanitarian Partners for the period of the MFF of 2021 to 2027.

It is interesting to note that more than 50% of today's members have been part of VOICE since the network was established as an independent entity in 2001. It shows that the network is standing together over time and has built sustainable credibility. VOICE continues to look at extending the network. Over the last two years, between 2021 and 2023, 17 new members joined VOICE.

VOICE remains open for new members. To provide more information about joining the network, a [new 'Join VOICE' web page](#), was set up.

VOICE FINANCES

Total expenses in 2023 amounted to €687,836. Human resources costs represented 77% of the organisation's expenditure. However, expenses related to meetings, events, working groups (2%), and communication (1.53%), as highlighted in the previous chapters, do not reflect the true impact of VOICE activities, networking, and visibility achieved in 2023, which was significant. Similarly, governance costs (1.42%) only represent a fraction of the time and energy the Board of Directors dedicated to VOICE, giving their time voluntarily, as well as convening the biggest ever General Assembly in 2023.

On the income side, for the first time, the DG ECHO grant increased to a total of €250,000 in 2023. This 25% increase from the previous year is a much-appreciated recognition of the network's work. However, membership fees remain the primary source of VOICE income and an expression of independence, totalling 67% of the organisation's €753,231 income.

The positive 2023 year-end result of €48,799 leaves VOICE in a good position for a secure financial year ahead, paving the way for further collective achievements.



Group photo at Women's Empowerment Centre (Kimanga IDP settlement, Fizi, Baraka, DRC).
©Photo: Hannu Happonen – Fida International

VOICE COMMUNICATION

In 2023, VOICE communication activities were further enhanced across all communication channels, both internal and external. VOICE continued to provide a platform for members to discuss specific crises and humanitarian policy topics with the organisation of several country and policy exchanges. In 2023, VOICE organised country exchanges about Afghanistan, Haiti, Liberia, Mali, Sudan, and Venezuela, as well as policy exchanges on the protection of aid workers and on how narratives can potentially influence policymakers.

The [VOICE at Work newsletter](#) was established as VOICE's external newsletter. In 2023, the VOICE Secretariat published three issues of the newsletter, which had been introduced for the first time in 2022, to raise awareness of VOICE and its members' work in delivering principled humanitarian aid to communities in need worldwide.



VOICE at Work, the external VOICE newsletter

The bi-annual magazine, the [VOICE Out Loud](#) was published once again in 2023, with two new issues. The *VOICE Out Loud 35*, "Localisation: Exploring a multifaceted agenda" and the *VOICE Out Loud 36* "From crisis to recovery: women's role in humanitarian action", gathered VOICE members' perspectives on localisation and the role of women in humanitarian aid, both very timely topics in the humanitarian community in 2023.

VOICE internal communication between the Secretariat and VOICE members was consolidated with 12 monthly issues of the internal newsletter, the *Flash*, complemented with regular updates of the VOICE Members' Room – a space dedicated to VOICE members with in-depth analysis, internal information, and regular updates on ongoing workstreams. Communication exchanges were organised ahead of key dates, such as the European Humanitarian Forum and the World Humanitarian Day to align communication efforts.

During the EHF 2023, the [VOICE X](#) (formerly Twitter) account was in the top three accounts that were most active and visible, together with DG ECHO's and Commissioner Janez Lenarčič's accounts. As well as this, the [VOICE LinkedIn](#) account saw a sharp increase in followers and became another key communication channel for the VOICE Secretariat to reach a wider audience.

In order to give further visibility to specific crises and events, the VOICE website has included dedicated spaces for the [Türkiye-Syria earthquake](#), the [humanitarian crisis in Gaza](#), and [COP28](#) during 2023. These dedicated areas included detailed updates, as well as information and statements from VOICE members.

As in previous years, the VOICE Secretariat organised two events to provide a platform for exchange and a space to debate with different organisations and stakeholders and provide the public with the opportunity to attend and be part of the discussion. In 2023, the two VOICE events were “Fighting hunger: a women-led response” and “Artificial Intelligence: disruption or opportunity for humanitarian aid?”. These were both in line with cross-cutting issues and the latest trends in the humanitarian sector. Both in-person events in Brussels brought together a wide variety of speakers in front of a full room of participants and were followed up with an event [key highlights report](#).

VOICE BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Dominic Crowley has served as VOICE President since the General Assembly 2018. As announced in 2023, his second and last mandate will come to an end in 2024. During the General Assembly 2024, a new President will be elected by the VOICE members.

Two Board members, both elected in 2017, finished their two consecutive mandates: Michael Mosselmans from Christian Aid UK and Vincent Stehli from Acción contra el Hambre Spain. VOICE would like to warmly thank them for their engagement and support over the past six years.

Edouard Rodier from NRC Europe came to the end of his first mandate and stood successfully for re-election. The three other vacant seats after the departure of Annelies Claessens, who left War Child NL, have been filled by Ruth Faber from EU-CORD, Charlotte Schneider from Action Contre la Faim France, and Ruth Watson from ACT Alliance. The four newly elected Board members took up a four-year mandate after the VOICE Statutes modification in 2022 when the duration changed from three to four years.

VOICE would like to thank all candidates for their interest during the Board members' elections at the General Assembly 2023 and welcomes all newly elected Board members.

Composition of the [Board of Directors](#) following the General Assembly 2023:

Dominic Crowley, VOICE President, Emergency Director, Concern Worldwide

Jean-Pierre Delomier, Operations Deputy Director, Handicap International - Humanity & Inclusion

Ruth Faber, CEO, EU-CORD

Michael Kühn, Senior Policy Advisor, Welthungerhilfe, Germany

Fie Lauritzen, Senior Humanitarian Policy Lead, DanChurchAid

Edouard Rodier, Director International Programmes, Norwegian Refugee Council Europe

Charlotte Schneider, Global Operations and Programs Director, Action Contre la Faim, France

Silvia Sinibaldi, Humanitarian Director, Caritas Italy

Ruth Watson, Humanitarian Policy and Practice Advisor, Act Alliance EU

VOICE SECRETARIAT

Under the leadership of the Director, Maria Groenewald, the strengthened and cohesive VOICE Secretariat continued its strong engagement in supporting the membership of the network.

Composition of the [VOICE Secretariat](#) as of December 2023:

Maria Groenewald, Director

Anna Bonomelli, Junior Advocacy Assistant

Suzanne Dominguez, Junior Advocacy Officer

Roberta Fadda, Senior Communication Officer

Francesca Giubilo, Senior Advocacy Officer

Marion Granger, Partnership and Advocacy Officer

Jaime Martín Farelo, Junior Communication Assistant

Cécile Muller, Membership and Finances Coordinator

VOICE MEMBERS 2023

AUSTRIA

-  CARE Österreich
-  Caritas Österreich
-  SOS Kinderdorf International

BELGIUM

-  Caritas International Belgium
-  HIAS Europe
-  Médecins du Monde (MDM) Belgium
-  Oxfam Solidarité - Solidariteit
-  Plan Belgium

CROATIA

-  International Medical Corps Croatia

CZECH REPUBLIC

-  ADRA Czech Republic
-  Caritas Czech Republic
-  People in Need (PIN)

DENMARK

-  ADRA Denmark Nødhjælp og udvikling
-  CARE Denmark
-  Dansk Folkehjælp Danish People's Aid
-  DanChurchAid (DCA)
-  Danish Refugee Council (DRC)
-  Mission East Mission Øst
-  Save the Children Denmark

FINLAND

-  Fida International
-  Finn Church Aid
-  World Vision Finland

FRANCE

-  Action Contre la Faim
-  ACTED Agence d'Aide à la Coopération Technique et au Développement
-  CARE France
-  Handicap International Humanity and Inclusion
-  La chaîne de l'Espoir
-  Première Urgence Internationale
-  Médecins du Monde (MDM) France
-  Relief International
-  Secours Catholique - Réseau Mondial Caritas
-  Secours Islamique France
-  Secours Populaire Français
-  Solidarités International
-  Télécoms Sans Frontières (TSF)

GERMANY

-  ADRA Deutschland
-  Aktion gegen den Hunger
-  Arbeiter-Samariter-Bund (ASB) Deutschland
-  CARE Deutschland
-  Deutscher Caritasverband Caritas Germany
-  Diakonie Katastrophenhilfe
-  International Rescue Committee Germany
-  Die JöHanniter. Aus Liebe zum Leben
-  Malteser International
-  Medico International
-  Plan International Germany
-  Welthungerhilfe
-  World Vision Germany

ITALY

-  Caritas Italiana
-  CESVI - Cooperazione e Sviluppo
-  COOPI
-  INTERSONS Organizzazione Umanitaria Onlus
-  JRS Jesuit Refugee Service
-  Oxfam Italia
-  Terre des Hommes Italy
-  WeWorld

IRELAND

-  Concern Worldwide
-  GOAL Global
-  Trócaire

LUXEMBOURG

-  Caritas Luxembourg

THE NETHERLANDS

-  CARE Nederland
-  Cordaid
-  Mercy Corps
-  World Vision Netherlands
-  Oxfam Novib
-  Save the Children Netherlands
-  War Child
-  ZOA

NORWAY

-  CARE Norway
-  Norwegian Church Aid
-  Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC)
-  Save the Children - Redd Barna

POLAND

-  Polish Humanitarian Action (PAH)

SLOVAKIA

-  Habitat for Humanity International

SPAIN

-  Acción Contra el Hambre
-  Alianza por la Solidaridad-ActionAid
-  Ayuda en Acción
-  Caritas Española
-  EDUCO
-  Médicos del Mundo
-  Oxfam Intermón

SWEDEN

-  LM International (Läkarmissionen)
-  PMU Interlife
-  Svenska kyrkan - Church of Sweden

SWITZERLAND

-  MEDAIR Medair

UNITED KINGDOM

-  CAFOD
-  Christian Aid
-  Plan International UK
-  Save the Children UK

89 members
19 countries



VOICE is the network of 89 European NGOs promoting principled and people-centred humanitarian aid. Collectively, VOICE aims to improve the quality and effectiveness of the European Union and its Member States' humanitarian aid. The network promotes the added value of NGOs as key humanitarian actors.

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