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## **PARTNERS IN HUMANITARIAN AID**

# **The development of the ECHO-NGO relationship as governed by the Framework Partnership Agreement**

**VOICE BRIEFING**

## Partners in Humanitarian Aid

The development of the ECHO-NGO relationship as governed  
by the Framework Partnership Agreement

## BRIEFING PAPER

### Brussels, 2019

VOICE is the network of more than 80 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.

VOICE facilitates the Framework Partnership Agreement (FPA) Watch Group and Task Force on behalf of all ECHO NGO partners.

All interviews undertaken for this paper were given on the basis of anonymity and confidentiality of the interviewee, allowing for open and frank dialogue. Interviewee names and organisations are listed in the references, but comments and quotations throughout the paper are not attributed to any individual or organisation.

The opinions expressed in this paper do not necessarily reflect the opinions of all interviewees or all VOICE members.

Interviews and desk reviews were undertaken in 2018.

VOICE, September 2019

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# INTRODUCTION

## 1. Outline of the Briefing

Since the establishment of the EU's Directorate-General for Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid (ECHO) in 1992 (then the European Community Humanitarian Office), the Voluntary Organisations in Cooperation in Emergencies (VOICE) network has served as the main NGO interlocutor with the EU institutions on humanitarian aid. VOICE has produced this briefing to take stock of the evolving NGO-ECHO partnership – enshrined with the signing of the Framework Partnership Agreement (FPA) – serving as an update of a previous VOICE publication on the topic from 2004.

The briefing looks in particular at the partnership between ECHO and NGOs in the context of the consultation process and the monitoring of the different FPAs. Since 1999, the main actor in this process has been the FPA Watch Group. VOICE established this group as a response to both the need for coordination among ECHO's NGO partners and the request by ECHO to have a single interlocutor. In light of regular opportunities to exchange with ECHO, including at the annual partners' conference and during the upcoming revision of the FPA, this briefing provides a much-needed, thorough overview of the background and history of the FPA and the FPA Watch Group. The briefing explores the achievements and limitations of the Watch Group and the ECHO-NGO partnership more broadly. The paper also discusses other channels of ECHO-NGO partnership.

The briefing is based upon a desk review and a series of semi-structured interviews with former and current members of the FPA Watch Group, ECHO officials, and staff from the VOICE Secretariat. The interviews were carried out either in 2004 (for the initial version) or in 2017 and 2018 (for the updated version). Interviewees were selected so as to ensure a broad range of backgrounds and experiences (different geographic regions, areas of involvement and areas of expertise) in terms of the FPA process, ECHO-NGO relations, and the Watch Group and Task Force.

## 2. ECHO's Partnership Approach

While many Directorate-Generals of the European Commission engage in "partnership" with civil society actors, the partnership approach utilised by ECHO is unique in comparison. ECHO is not an implementing agency itself, instead it financially supports humanitarian assistance projects carried out by partners: selected NGOs, International Organisations (IOs), the Red Cross, UN agencies, and specialised agencies of the Member States. Under this partnership, as well as financing partners' projects, ECHO gathers essential information, experience and perspectives from its partners in order to achieve optimal aid programming and meet humanitarian needs. It could be argued that the symbiotic nature of this operational partnership allows ECHO to be considered one of the most effective Commission services in terms of accomplishing its humanitarian mandate.

Through collaboration with the humanitarian community, ECHO has successfully contributed towards influencing the political environment in the Commission and Member States, most notably exemplified by the creation of the European Consensus on Humanitarian Aid<sup>1</sup>, which since its inception in 2007 has provided a common vision and strong policy framework for the EU institutions and Member States when developing their humanitarian strategies and policies. Reconfirmed in 2017, the Consensus has substantial implications for the ECHO-NGO partnership. Firstly, it asserts the necessity of partnership with NGOs through affirming the added value of NGOs as humanitarian actors: "Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) are essential to the humanitarian response as they deliver the majority of international humanitarian aid due to their field-presence and flexibility, often with a high-level of specialisation. They are also a direct expression of active citizenship at the service of the humanitarian cause".<sup>2</sup>

Secondly, the Consensus indicates how partnership between the EU institutions and implementing agencies should look in reality. It emphasises the importance of diversity in partnership: "The EU should underline its intrinsic support for a plurality of implementing Partners – the NGOs, the UN and the Red Cross Movement - and acknowledges that each has comparative advantages in responding to certain situations or circumstances".<sup>3</sup> Moreover, it emphasises flexibility, simplification, and quality, calling for EU donors to "maximise the opportunity for flexibility within their systems and streamline procedures to the extent possible in order to reduce the

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<sup>1</sup> [European Consensus on Humanitarian Aid](#).

<sup>2</sup> *European Consensus on Humanitarian Aid, Article 49.*

<sup>3</sup> *European Consensus on Humanitarian Aid, Article 50.*

administrative burden on implementing organisations, whilst ensuring quality in partnership and strong accountability in aid delivery”.<sup>4</sup> In this way, the Consensus serves as a powerful tool for advocacy which can assist humanitarian NGOs in advocating for a strong and productive partnership with ECHO grounded in respect for the humanitarian principles. It provides a benchmark in terms of what NGOs can expect in their partnership with ECHO (and vice versa).

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<sup>4</sup> *European Consensus on Humanitarian Aid, Article 52.*

# THE FRAMEWORK PARTNERSHIP AGREEMENT

Since 1993, the partnership between ECHO and its partners has been governed by the signing of a Framework Partnership Agreement (FPA). The FPA is the legal contract that formalises the partnership with NGOs and IOs, while ECHO's relationship with UN agencies is governed by the Financial and Administrative Framework Agreements (FAFA), first signed in 2003<sup>5</sup>. The FPA is designed to ensure ECHO-funded humanitarian partners and operations meet the highest standards of performance and quality. The FPA both enshrines the principles of partnership between ECHO and its partners and sets the legal provisions applicable to the humanitarian operations financed by ECHO. It defines the respective roles, rights and obligations of partners. To date, there have been five FPAs, the first entering into force in 1993, the second in 1998, the third in 2003, the fourth in 2008 and the fifth in 2014. Drafting of the next FPA began in 2018 and it is due to enter into force in January 2021.

Having an FPA is particularly advantageous for the humanitarian aid arm of the Commission in that it allows for project-financing procedures that move quicker than other mechanisms of the EU, enabling a relatively fast response to critical emergencies such as natural disasters and conflicts. The FPA simplifies the process of background checking of implementing agencies undertaken by other Commission services, with a rigorous selection of professional, high-quality, reliable partners having already taken place before signing the FPA. The FPA also facilitates more flexible funding, something that is unique to ECHO within the European Commission.

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<sup>5</sup> The FAFA replaced the 9 August 1999 "Agreement between the United Nations and the European Community on the principles applying to the financing or co-financing by the Community of programmes and projects administered by the United Nations". An addendum to the FAFA was signed in February 2014. This is the consolidated version of the FAFA in force since February 2014.



## 1. Selection of NGO partners

The selection of ECHO's partners has become more formalised and sophisticated over the years. For example, in order to apply for the signature of the latest FPA which entered into force in 2014, NGOs have to comply with eligibility and suitability criteria established by Article 7 of the Humanitarian Aid Regulation, as well as the Financial Regulation and Rules of Application. These regulations stipulate that, in order to be eligible, NGOs must be non-profit-making autonomous organisations set up in an EU Member State, and with their main headquarters in either a Member State or the third countries in receipt of EU aid. They must also be specialised in the field of humanitarian aid, that is to say having at least three years of proven relevant experience in the humanitarian field. Other factors are considered: administrative capacity, finance management capacity, technical and logistical capacity, local partnership and experience in operational contexts, and readiness to take part in coordination activities established for overall operational effectiveness. Moreover, NGOs must respect the fundamental humanitarian principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence, which were reaffirmed in the European Consensus on Humanitarian Aid.

Throughout the mid-1990s, NGOs signed the FPA one-by-one. In 1996, a list of NGO eligibility criteria was presented, but its status was unclear. Following the 1999 FPA's entry into force, it was not uncommon for ECHO to work with NGOs that had not signed the FPA, simply because there was no procedure for late signature. Equally, ECHO had no system for suspending FPAs even when NGOs were not fulfilling their requirements. Since then ECHO and its NGO partners have made a lot of progress from the more ad-hoc approach that existed previously. Nowadays, on top of its risk and assessment measures, ECHO has formalised suspension and termination procedures for when an NGO partner is deemed to be no longer compliant with the required conditions. Thanks to its undertaking of assessments and audits of its partners, ECHO mitigates against the risks incurred in implementing projects via NGO partners.

At the time of writing, ECHO has signed the FPA with 205 NGO partners in 19 European countries.

## 2. Progress under the different FPAs

### *The first FPA: 1993*

The FPA has evolved substantially over the years. The first so-called “Partnership Framework Agreement” (PFA) was signed in 1993, aiming to standardise and clarify EU decision making in the field of humanitarian aid. Emphasis was placed on the organisation’s capacity to implement humanitarian aid operations quickly and efficiently, and not on the organisation’s fundamental characteristics, principles or specific ways of working. ECHO took a top-down approach, and would sometimes use the PFA simply as a means to find an implementing partner for a Commission-identified programme.

- *FPA 1: 1 September 1993*
- *FPA 2: 1 January 1999*
- *FPA 3: 1 January 2004*
- *FPA 4: 1 January 2008*
- *FPA 5: 1 January 2014*

Dates of entry into force of the five different

In these early years, NGOs were disappointed that ECHO extended the PFA several times without first consulting the NGOs. The agreement was also criticised for not authentically reflecting the humanitarian principles which became central to later FPAs. This was partially remedied by the EU Regulation on Humanitarian Aid, which was drawn up in June 1996 and included contributions from NGOs. However NGOs felt the PFA represented neither ‘framework’ (there were notable inconsistencies from project to project) nor ‘partnership’ (it was based on control rather than trust with a lack of dialogue).

### *The second FPA: 1999*

Like its predecessor, the second FPA, finalised in February 1998 and implemented from January 1999, emphasised the technical and logistical capacities of partners. There were significant changes however, including a formal recognition of the impartial allocation of funds and the respect and encouragement of the NGOs’ independence. As far as the humanitarian principles were concerned, the FPA’s preamble noted that the partner’s impartiality would be taken into account. This was the first FPA to define the

ECHO-NGO relationship as a partnership, with the FPA's provisions outlining that a "spirit of partnership" would be realised through the regular exchange of information "both bilaterally and collectively". ECHO would participate in meetings organised by partners to stimulate coordination and exchange information and would "support a forum for debating issues of mutual interest" as well as arranging meetings with humanitarian organisations to study humanitarian objectives and principles. Finally, the provisions also stated that "ECHO and a representation mandated by the humanitarian organisations agree to meet once a year to monitor the implementation of the Framework Partnership Contract and its procedures."

### *The third FPA: 2004*

In 2003, a third FPA was finalised and it came into force on 1 January 2004. It was intended to represent a "new approach" in terms of partnership as well as operational practice, with the concept of "quality partnership" introduced for the first time. Whereas previous FPAs focused on the technical and logistical capacities of NGO partners, the 2004 FPA placed greater emphasis on the adherence of the NGO partner to the humanitarian principles. It also improved monitoring and accountability in terms of accountability both to the beneficiaries of the humanitarian projects and the EU taxpayer, something which was strongly pushed for by NGOs via the FPA Watch Group and was later enshrined in the European Consensus on Humanitarian Aid (see *Box 2*). These changes were partly borne out of a new regime of financial controls in the European Commission, most notably the 2002 Financial Regulation which directly affected humanitarian operations from the beginning of 2003.

*"Accountability in the context of humanitarian aid encompasses both accountability to European citizens on the good use of public funds, and accountability to those in need in the countries facing humanitarian crisis"*  
(Article 43)

Accountability in the European Consensus on Humanitarian Aid

The FPA also sought to create simplification of procedures and a results-oriented approach. The new FPA's emphasis on quality partnership was designed to instil greater trust between NGOs and ECHO than with previous FPAs. The emphasis shifted from ex-ante controls on NGOs and supply-side negotiations regarding inputs (supplies, personnel, and logistics) for projects towards examining whether NGOs met the stated objectives of each project. This results-oriented approach assumed partnership with highly professional, high-quality

humanitarian organisations that were able to demonstrate proven experience and possess established internal practices for emergency work.

#### *The fourth FPA: 2008*

Like its predecessor, the 2008 FPA once again emphasised the importance of quality partnership. However, it was made clear that quality partnership should not come at the expense of the diversity of partners. ECHO attempted to preserve diversity partly through the introduction of differentiated control mechanisms for NGO partners based on their financial and administrative capacities. Partners deemed to have specialised capacities were categorised as “A-partners” (standing for “action-related monitoring”) and faced more extensive controls focused on the humanitarian action itself at the implementation and liquidation stages as well as through ex-post audits. Those with greater capacities were termed “P-partners” (standing for “prior assessment and own procedures”) and faced only ex-ante assessments of their own procedures and lighter controls. The 2008 FPA also aimed to simplify rules and procedures, reducing the reporting burden on NGO partners and clarifying rules on equipment and stocks. In 2008, ECHO also ran the first evaluation of the FPA ahead of writing the new FPA 2014.

#### *The fifth FPA: 2014*

Seeking to improve on the 2008 FPA, the 2014 FPA committed to more flexible, long-term, and reliable funding as well as to advancing diversity and simplification. As noted in a 2012 ECHO-commissioned comprehensive evaluation of the 2008 FPA<sup>6</sup>, there were still gains to be made in terms of diversity. The degree to which the distinction between A and P-partners functioned effectively in practice was questionable, with P-partners not enjoying the anticipated “high degree of autonomy”. Moreover, NGO partners from Southern and Eastern Europe were underrepresented, and at least 75 percent of partners from these areas were inactive or implemented very few projects. In light of this, the 2014 FPA replaced the A and P-partner categories with differentiated selection criteria or thresholds, applicable to so-called “niche” organisations working in very specific or underrepresented sectors. Clearer benchmarks detailing the minimum capacity required of an NGO in order to become an ECHO partner were established, with the emphasis placed on the quality and results of previous actions. These benchmarks were published to ensure organisations had a better understanding of the requirements.

The A and P control mechanisms were replaced by financial risks assessments at contracting and final payment stage which involve an assessment of the funding capacity of the NGO and impose mitigation measures accordingly to protect ECHO from the risk they perceive in funding partners’ projects. For the 2014 FPA, these risk measures are largely financial in nature, whereas for the 2008 FPA they determined whether partners could use their own procedures or not. Under the 2014 FPA, partners

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<sup>6</sup> June 2012, FPA 2008 evaluation:

[http://ec.europa.eu/echo/files/evaluation/2012/fpa2008\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/echo/files/evaluation/2012/fpa2008_en.pdf)

with robust indicators work with less constraints, while partners with weaker indicators are subject to financing thresholds to mitigate the financial risks incurred by ECHO. At the liquidation stage, an NGO with an error rate below 2 percent receives a fast liquidation procedure including lighter ex-post financial checks. The error rate analyses the level of assurance to claim eligible expenditure and is based on non-eligible expenditures detected at final payment and during audits over a period of 3 years.

Furthermore, the 2014 FPA emphasised a results-oriented approach demonstrated by the introduction (albeit a year after the FPA initially came into effect) of Key Results Indicators (KRI) and Key Outcome Indicators (KOI) which aimed to improve the measurability of what the projects achieve and their overall quality. Other changes from the 2008 FPA included the introduction of a Gender-Age Marker to assess the extent to which each humanitarian action integrates gender and age considerations, recognising the importance of gender-sensitive humanitarian assistance as outlined in the European Consensus on Humanitarian Aid and the European Commission Staff Working Document on 'Gender in Humanitarian Aid: Different Needs, Adapted Assistance'<sup>7</sup>. The Resilience marker was also added in 2016. Visibility requirements demanded of NGO partners were also increased, with partners having to demonstrate at final report stage that they complied with the minimal requirements, risking a penalty of up to 2 percent of contracts if they do not respect visibility conditions.

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<sup>7</sup> [http://ec.europa.eu/echo/sites/echo-site/files/Gender\\_SWD\\_2013.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/echo/sites/echo-site/files/Gender_SWD_2013.pdf)

## The FPAs: a summary

Together, ECHO and its NGO partners made several key steps forward with the signing of each successive FPA:

- 1993 First “Partnership Framework Agreement” introduced
- 1999 “Spirit of partnership” formalised, with the promise of meetings and information exchange
- 2004 Idea of “quality partnership” introduced, with a stronger emphasis on the humanitarian principles, an improvement in monitoring and accountability, an attempt at simplification, and the introduction of a results-oriented approach
- 2008 Diversity of partners emphasised and further simplification attempted
- 2014 Framework for ensuring partner diversity changed, further simplification attempted, financial risk assessments introduced, and results-oriented approach reinforced through introduction of indicators and markers

### Going Forwards

As the 2014 FPA was prolonged for two years, the new FPA will be launched in January 2021. Today, the ECHO-NGO partnership continues to grapple with many of the issues that characterised the negotiation of earlier FPAs, such as the results-oriented approach, simplification, and diversity. While acknowledging the achievements already made, consultations for the next FPA brought these challenges forward again.

# THE FPA WATCH GROUP

The process of drafting the Framework Partnership Agreement has often proven to be time consuming and challenging for both ECHO and its NGO partners. Revisions of the FPA have been written and issued by ECHO, with NGOs integrated into the process through consultations. Through engaging in consultations, ECHO has demonstrated a willingness to work with NGOs and to listen to their concerns and interests. Bringing in the voice of NGOs ensures their highly valuable practical experience and expertise from the field is incorporated into the FPA process.

The VOICE network was instrumental in formalising this consultation process through setting up and facilitating the FPA Watch Group. This group, known prior to 1999 as the Dialogue Group, serves as the main interlocutor for ECHO in this ongoing consultation process. It was established to represent the views of ECHO's NGO partners in monitoring and reviewing the FPA. The evolution of this group is a positive example of the improving partnership between donors and NGOs in the humanitarian sector. The FPA Watch Group has secured concrete achievements such as shaping the FPA guidelines and less concrete but nonetheless important achievements such as building trust and the partnership spirit. Moreover, the experience acquired through FPA consultations will be crucial in addressing future challenges, in terms of the FPA itself in helping ensure future FPA negotiations result in an optimal outcome for both sides, but also beyond the FPA realm in strengthening the ECHO-NGO relationship to facilitate a unified stance in the face of broader, EU-wide issues, such as the EU annual budget and Multi-Annual Financial Framework (MFF).

## 1. The Dialogue Group

### *The Dialogue Group and the opportunities of 1997*

Since the first FPA entered into force in 1993, NGOs and other ECHO partners sought dialogue with ECHO concerning the content of the FPA. Between 1993 and the entering into force of the second FPA in 1999, an ad-hoc group of partners along with VOICE worked together in the so-called Dialogue Group, seeking to discuss the FPA and apply pressure to ECHO. However, despite some meetings between the parties there was very little tangible interaction with ECHO. The General Conditions of the 1993 FPA stated that the agreement would be valid until the end of 1994 and that this period could be extended on the basis of common agreement with partners. Instead, throughout the 1990s ECHO repeatedly extended the agreement

without prior consultation of the NGOs. Only in May 1997 did ECHO embark upon its first consultation with NGO partners, conducting a meeting in which it set out its proposals for the revision of the FPA.

In light of this meeting, collaborating via VOICE and the Dialogue Group, NGOs prepared a response to ECHO's initial proposals and released a position document on 7 July 1997. The document deals with the values of the ECHO-NGO partnership, expressing concerns about the lack of dialogue from ECHO and asking for more transparency regarding ECHO's intentions for the consultation process. Moreover, the NGOs recognised and endorsed ECHO's wish to be considered as more than simply a bank while maligning the lack of clarity from ECHO "regarding the role that it does want to play". In this vein, the document argued that ECHO should become "a more rounded instrument of administrative and financial management", discussing operational strategies with NGOs, raising awareness of humanitarian crises, and protecting the humanitarian principles.<sup>8</sup> In September 1997, the Dialogue Group met with ECHO and presented proposals for a revision of the preamble and provisions of the FPA, as well as the general conditions and annexes.

### *Achievements of the Dialogue Group*

Responding to this input from the Dialogue Group, ECHO accepted several proposals to increase the contact between the two parties, including conducting annual meetings to monitor the implementation of the FPA and increasing the exchange of information. These principles and concepts would be enshrined in the next FPA preamble and provisions. ECHO would not take on board the proposal of the group to include the concept of "dialogue" however, committing instead to "consulting" the partners at regular intervals. This slight distinction highlighted ECHO's concern that enshrining "dialogue" in the contract could permit interference from the partner organisations in ECHO's decision-making processes.

The group made important progress throughout the consultation of the 1999 FPA, however they remained concerned about the vague definition of "partnership" that was used and feared that consultation would turn out to be merely a listening session. Furthermore, the group was disappointed by ECHO's rejection of their request to formalise the consultation process. Instead, ECHO limited consultation to a Forum<sup>9</sup> and an annual meeting to monitor the FPA and its procedures.

## 2. Overview of the FPA Watch Group

### *Origins of the Watch Group*

The FPA Watch Group was set up by VOICE as a working group when the re-negotiated FPA entered into force in January 1999. It sought to continue the work of

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<sup>8</sup> ['More than just a bank: the revision of ECHO's Framework Partnership Agreement with humanitarian agencies'](#), November 1997

<sup>9</sup> This Forum is now the [ECHO Annual Partners' Conference](#).



the Dialogue Group, representing the views of ECHO's NGO partners in all matters relating to the FPA and working towards a common interpretation and consistent application of the FPA. As well as these more technical aspects, the group was designed to serve as a place of cooperation, exchange of information and reflection. The group also served to bring forward NGOs' added value as key humanitarian actors, such as their high quality standards of professionalism, expertise, field presence and flexibility.

Whereas the Dialogue Group focused solely on consultation on the content of the FPA, the first task of the Watch Group was to monitor its implementation. Since then, the FPA Watch Group has held a unique dual role, serving both as a body for consultation and (ideally) negotiation when the FPA comes around for renewal and as a "watchdog" body between renewal periods monitoring the implementation of successive FPAs. In theory, the Watch Group should serve both functions equally effectively, however in practice the balance has occasionally been lost. For example, following the entering into force of the 1999 FPA, ECHO almost immediately began another revision process meaning that the Watch Group was forced to neglect monitoring and once again concentrate its time and resources on consultation for the FPA revision.

In 2018, the Terms of Reference of the group have been slightly modified (now renewed every four years instead of three) but remain largely unchanged. According to the 2016 Terms of Reference, the group tackles their workload using three main methods. Firstly, the group meets at least twice per year (three times in 2017) – usually in Brussels hosted by VOICE or ECHO – to discuss and seek collective positioning on any comments and proposals that have arisen either from ECHO NGO partners or from ECHO. Secondly, the group meets with ECHO to discuss ideas and comments that have arisen, and negotiate the issues as necessary. Thirdly, members of the Watch Group and the wider community of ECHO NGO partners are encouraged to inform the group on any issues that arise in relation to the FPA. These will then be communicated among the group by the VOICE Secretariat via email in between Watch Group meetings, or will be discussed by the group during meetings. If a broader perspective is needed, the infrastructure of VOICE is used for the group to consult with the wider community of ECHO partners. In return, the group will report on progress to this wider community through, for example, the VOICE website.

## *Composition of the Watch Group*

As of 2017, the group comprised 31 NGOs from 12 countries representing 43% of ECHO's FPA partners. Although the Watch Group is facilitated by VOICE, from its inception the group has represented all ECHO NGO partners, and (as of 2016) four non-VOICE members sit in the group (AVSI, the HALO Trust, HOPE'87, and MSF). Each member organisation designates one individual to be part of the Watch Group and to attend meetings, which take place at least twice per year. For the membership of the first Watch Group, VOICE proposed a group of NGO representatives/ECHO partners based on the following criteria (nowadays formalised in the Terms of Reference of the group):

- *Representativeness:*
  - Representation of most EU Member States
  - Representation of NGOs of different size, expertise and degrees of funding from ECHO
  - Balance of VOICE members and non-members
  - Other relevant organisations can sit in the group as observers e.g. the IFRC
  
- *Knowledge and experience:*
  - Good knowledge of the FPA and a regular contractual relationship with ECHO
  - Participation of former Dialogue Group members involved in the previous FPA consultation process to ensure continuity with previous discussions with ECHO

One of the major limitations of the Dialogue Group was that it was often perceived to be overly exclusive in terms of membership, with outsiders or smaller NGOs finding it difficult to engage. The Watch Group has addressed this by reviewing and reconfirming its membership every four years. VOICE is tasked with ensuring the membership of the group is a balanced representation of ECHO's FPA partners, taking into account the differences in size, expertise, and geographical location of different NGOs. After the group is constituted, all ECHO partners are asked to approve the composition of the group, ensuring its legitimacy as an interlocutor for ECHO. The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC – represented by the Red Cross EU office) has held observer status within the group since the beginning of 2000, and has made important contributions to the group over the years.

With over thirty members, the FPA Watch Group is large in size. This can be attributed to two factors: (i) NGOs recognise the added-value of being in the group and therefore want to join it, and (ii) the group incorporates a wide range of members to increase its representativeness. As noted by one interviewee, "the diversity of NGOs is the strength of the group, it brings different organisations together, showing the donor that there is discussion and coordination among NGOs on key priorities and creating

a real sense of partnership among the NGOs on key issues". The ECHO officials interviewed praised this representativeness and recognised the comparative advantage for NGOs of group membership: "there is a danger that a gap is created between people who are joining the Watch Group and organisations that are not represented... organisations that have somebody represented in the group often have better proposals." VOICE ensures this gap does not exist by sharing all FPA Watch Group documents and minutes publicly on VOICE's website, so that non-Watch Group members remain updated and informed.

The large size of the group can pose challenges. NGOs are aware that the prospect of sitting around a table with over thirty NGOs may seem quite unbalanced for the 4 to 5 ECHO representatives in attendance. Meanwhile, the Watch Group's size makes it difficult for big thinking or real dialogue to occur internally within the group, with some members speaking much less than others. Thus, since 2012, to overcome the cumbersome nature of working in such a large group, VOICE introduced workshops for each FPA Watch group morning session. There are usually three workshops on specific FPA-related issues. This method allows participants to exchange on issues and good practices concerning the different topics of the work plan (such as HIPs, audits, consortia etc.) within smaller groups and in a more informal manner. Interviewees testified to the success of this method of working, with one saying that it "means that those that are the most vocal will not always get their way", and another arguing that it is "a good format to bring in less vocal actors and ensuring everyone who has something to say can say it and feels entitled to say it".

### *The Task Force*

The FPA Watch Group elects a smaller, implementing body, the Task Force, as not all Watch Group members possess the time, resources, or geographical proximity to ECHO's Brussels headquarters in order to regularly contribute to FPA issues. The Task Force relies heavily on input from the Watch Group, which has a vast range of knowledge thanks to its large and diverse membership, including experts in topics such as funding and legal affairs, as well as humanitarian sector officials with extensive field experience and knowledge of other donors such as DEVCO and EU Member States. While the Task Force undertakes much of the practical work, they rely on the Watch Group for collecting evidence and undertaking in-depth consultations through surveys for example. Today, the Task Force continuously updates the Watch Group on its work and seeks their validation. For example, they propose the group's yearly work plan which is then approved by the whole Watch Group. In this way, the work of the Watch Group underpins and legitimises the work of the Task Force.

The relationship between the Task Force and Watch Group has not always been this strong. Interviewees stated that the relationship between the Task Force and the Watch Group has improved over time, with the Task Force originally perceived as a "closed shop", but now being more open, sharing the minutes of its meetings and presenting its work at Watch Group meetings. As noted by one interviewee, "through these minutes Watch Group members can get a lot of information indirectly from

ECHO and don't have to wait until the next meeting, meaning they have the same level of information as Task Force members". Since the first renewal of the Task Force in 2011-12, the Watch Group has been able to have more input into its work, while providing a lot of information, capacity, and resources. VOICE is crucial in ensuring a strong relationship between the two. According to one interviewee, "the relationship between the Watch Group and the Task Force exists because of the VOICE Secretariat, who are instrumental in making the link between the two".

The increased transparency of the Task Force was boosted by the introduction of elections in 2016 to select Task Force members. Initially the Task Force was a group of organisations represented by an individual who, if they stood down, would be replaced by another individual from their organisation. However, in 2016, ten individuals ran for eight places on the Task Force, with the Watch Group voting by secret ballot. While the emphasis in the Watch Group is on diverse and equal representation of the full spectrum of ECHO partners, Task Force membership is much more dependent on the experience and know-how of the individual running for election.

### *VOICE in the Watch Group*

VOICE is the main interlocutor for humanitarian NGOs with the EU institutions, and includes about half of all ECHO partners in its membership<sup>10</sup>. VOICE serves as the FPA Watch Group's facilitator, undertaking a range of administrative tasks in preparing for and following-up from meetings (drafting agendas, registration lists, minutes and so on). Interviewees agreed that VOICE undertakes these duties well, with one stating "VOICE is very good at being fast and efficient". VOICE also guides the meetings themselves, ensuring they are structured so as to encourage constructive and open dialogue. Nowadays, NGOs gather in the morning of the day-long Watch Group meetings, allowing them the opportunity to express their concerns freely behind closed doors, consolidating key messages to be presented to ECHO staff in the afternoon. Interviewees expressed their support for this format, with one noting that in the morning sessions "it is really nice to see that we as NGOs have something to share with ECHO [...] that we are not only asking for information, complaining or asking for funding but also providing analysis and expertise". Another noted that the format guarantees that the tone in the afternoon is more diplomatic, in that when "ECHO comes there is a better atmosphere and feedback is given in a constructive way", ensuring that ECHO is happy to continue the dialogue going forwards. VOICE informs ECHO in advance of the meeting regarding the issues that the NGOs will likely raise with them, with ECHO doing the same. Previously, ECHO entered the meetings without being pre-warned about the topics of discussion, often forcing incomplete or inaccurate responses.

There was some disagreement among interviewees as to how hands on VOICE should be. When dealing with the legal and administrative aspects of the FPA, the group unavoidably touches on broader policy matters, which lie outside its immediate

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<sup>10</sup> VOICE's members receive roughly 80% of ECHO funding, as of November 2017.

mandate and work plan, such as ECHO's allocation of funds, the nature of partnership, transparency, whether ECHO aid is needs-based, and the Grand Bargain.<sup>11</sup> There is not always a clear distinction between FPA matters and these other policy issues. Accordingly, one interviewee stated that "VOICE is too cautious in handling the Watch Group in the knowledge that it is not just a VOICE group" and said they "should be more directive and propositional in aligning Watch Group work with broader VOICE work as non-VOICE members in the Watch Group appreciate VOICE's role". Another agreed that VOICE "should embrace this fuzziness and account for the bigger political perspective to reach the full potential of the Watch Group". In contrast, others argued that VOICE has the balance correct: "people expect VOICE to solve everything and to really push ECHO sometimes, but this should be the role of the Watch Group using the power of the partners".

This dichotomy of thought shows the challenge VOICE faces as they strive to mediate these differences of opinion. In general, VOICE sees it as important to keep these issues separate and to tackle other political concerns in other fora. Nonetheless, in the group's 2018 work plan VOICE ensures coordination between, for example, the FPA Watch Group and the VOICE Grand Bargain Task Force to reflect that some of the Grand Bargain work streams (such as the need for harmonisation and simplification) are reflected in the new FPA.

On the whole, interviewees considered VOICE to be indispensable to the Watch Group. One described VOICE as "the mother of the FPA Watch Group", while others stated that "everything goes through VOICE" and that "the Watch Group relies on them heavily to follow up and make sure things happen". ECHO staff interviewed supported this viewpoint, acknowledging the difficulty of VOICE's task considering the amount of organisations in the group and their differing financial and sectoral interests. ECHO staff noted that considering these constraints "VOICE is effective in its role, balancing the position of the NGOs, presenting the message to ECHO in the right tone, and utilising its experience and knowledge of the NGO community and what is at stake to keep the church in the middle of the village". While some ECHO staff interviewed in 2004 expressed a degree of confusion regarding the distinction between the Watch Group and VOICE, this has improved, with the ECHO staff interviewed in 2017 well-aware of the function and role of VOICE.

### 3. Efficacy of the Watch Group

The Watch Group is a unique body. Interviewees pointed out there are no like-for-like equivalents in EU Member States, with one saying that "it is the only forum of its type that exists and is the only way to do" ECHO-NGO relations on FPA matters. Another described it as "quite a special model". NGOs recognise the suitability of the Watch Group as a vehicle for representing NGOs towards ECHO in matters relating to the FPA. NGOs that are members of either body express their appreciation of the added-

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<sup>11</sup> ["Grand Bargain - A Shared Commitment to Better Serve People in Need"](#) (VOICE).

value of being a member. One interviewee stated that “there is a very big value in having the Watch Group in that it is one of the very few occasions where ECHO’s partners come together and have a forum to exchange, allowing them to have their voices heard and for the NGO community at large to factor those voices in”. Another said they witnessed an “increasing involvement of NGOs in the Watch Group as more and more people want to join it”, while another said the group is “really well done and very important for relations with ECHO”. While there is sometimes frustration about a lack of progress, without the Watch Group and its Task Force, ECHO’s relations with its partners would be vastly different, with much less dialogue and consultation.

### *Gathering and sharing information*

The Watch Group serves as a forum through which its members share and discuss FPA-related information gathered from within their organisations, networks, national platforms, or from local partners, helping to inform and guide the activities of all ECHO partners. In turn, through exchange with ECHO, the group directly collects information from EU decision-makers which is transferred back to the NGO community.

Different organisations play different roles in this gathering and sharing of information. For some organisations, particularly those without EU offices and less regular bilateral exchange with ECHO, the main benefit of the group is for gaining information. One interviewee noted that the main added-value of his organisation being in the group is “meeting other FPA partners, to gain knowledge about problems and partnership with ECHO and common problems”. Another noted that before joining the group, their organisation “encountered some problems but had a lack of awareness that other partners were experiencing similar problems and thought it was only them with every other partner meeting ECHO requirements”. Such organisations also receive an otherwise unattainable level of access to ECHO, with one interviewee noting that the group is “informative and empowering, granting easier access to ECHO, especially as we do not have a permanent representative in Brussels”. Others, notably those with more direct access to ECHO in Brussels, can contribute more actively at meetings, sharing information gathered bilaterally.

This disparity can create frustrations, and some Watch Group members have contended that only people who have a lot of experience with ECHO should be represented in the group. One interviewee stated that “Watch Group members can be there to gain information but also need to be active and contribute” but they “are not sure this is always the case”. However, the same interviewee noted that an organisation’s ability to contribute “depends on the level of their relationship with ECHO, and it is also hard to feedback to the group if you don’t have any operations ongoing”. Larger organisations with a strong presence in Brussels also gain from hearing the viewpoints and experiences of organisations from all over Europe. Moreover, an interviewee from a smaller organisation with no EU office noted that, while they gain a lot in terms of information and access from the group, in turn they “do try to give input and make the common voice of the group more effective and strong”. VOICE maintains the important principle that if FPA Task Force

representatives are required to have a certain level of knowledge and expertise on ECHO funds, the FPA Watch Group should be representative of all FPA partners where all participants get a chance to both share and learn from group exchanges. While there may be indirect advantages to participating in the group, it should also be noted that it demands significant time, resources, and motivation. On the whole, the group brings together diverse organisations, facilitates information exchange and creates a coordinated NGO position on FPA matters that empowers all group members.

### *Internal unity*

In a group with the size and diversity of the FPA Watch Group differences of interests will naturally occur, and on occasion members have struggled to align on certain issues. Sometimes differences have materialised between larger NGOs and smaller, so-called “niche organisations”<sup>12</sup>. The Watch Group is tasked with defending the interests of the whole NGO ECHO partner community, and while ECHO’s partner community has grown over the years, so has the discrepancy in capacity between the smaller and larger “mega-NGOs” which have restructured to operate based on global business models. Their expansion represents both a potential threat and an opportunity to the Watch Group. While for smaller-sized organisations without EU offices the Watch Group permits otherwise unattainable access to ECHO, these larger NGOs have the resources to communicate bilaterally with ECHO, including designated EU offices and EU staff across advocacy and policy roles.

If their interests are successfully aligned with the rest of the group, the extra resources of the large NGOs can help amplify the messages of the group. One example of good practice is the case of the so-called alternative procedures, initiated by large NGOs working on the Syria crisis and culminating in a document that served the interests of all partners.<sup>13</sup> However, these large organisations have their own individual interests and objectives in their relationship with ECHO under the FPA which may not always match the collective good. Going forward, it is important that if an issue affects all partners it should be solved via the group and not bilaterally. As noted by one interviewee, the size and representativeness of the Watch Group “adds weight to its opinion” such that “going bilaterally [to ECHO] would not have the same impact”. VOICE ensures the group’s working methods cater for its diverse membership.

### *Advocacy reach and influence*

Some interviewees questioned the extent to which the Watch Group reaches out to the correct ECHO representative. The group mainly meets with ECHO staff from ECHO Unit E1 (International and Interinstitutional relations, Legal Framework), formerly the ECHO 4-NGO sector, on very specific and technical issues. In this way, the Watch Group often engages with ECHO staff who have a technical speciality rather

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<sup>12</sup> On its [website](#), ECHO defines niche organisations as those “that provide support and capacity-building activities necessary for the implementation of a programme or an action (e.g. map-making, mine clearance, telecommunication, organisations specialised in transport)”.

<sup>13</sup> Procedure for working under Extreme and Exceptional Operational Constraints.

than a decision-making role, raising questions over the influence of the group's advocacy on ECHO policy-making. Moreover, interviewees explained that close relationships formed with D1 Unit staff increased trust substantially, but could make dialogue less critical or objective. As noted by one interviewee, "variety in who we speak to is all-important to gain as much insight and information as possible". Further involvement of ECHO's operational units in receiving direct feedback on issues such as the HIP and projects cycle in general could be important in extending the influence and visibility of the Watch Group. Other interviewees argued it would be useful to reach-out to Director-level: "it would be good sometimes for higher management to hear the concerns of partners and have a dialogue with them". Another suggested the group should "map out in the different ECHO directorates which individuals holds the power and target the people in the driving seat".

It is important to note that the group is striving to reach out to different people within ECHO. Whereas in the late 1990s and early 2000s the Watch Group was interacting exclusively with the legal-financial unit of ECHO regarding FPA matters, nowadays different units, notably the policy and operational units, due to their growing importance, are engaged with in order to influence overall ECHO decision-making. As such, NGOs find themselves dealing with "several ECHOs" rather than just one, which can be confusing on the one hand, but also positive on the other, extending the influence of the FPA Watch Group over ECHO's broader policy agenda. In addition, ECHO staff at field level represent a further layer of necessary interaction.

Nonetheless, the advocacy achievements of the Watch Group are clear to see, with several notable successes in influencing ECHO to make changes to FPAs to more fully reflect the needs and interests of NGOs. Issues do remain with the FPA, with certain interviewees pointing to the constraining nature of the thresholds in limiting the work partners are able to undertake, the lengthy time gap between the level of needs appearing and the actual aid being administered to beneficiaries, and the need for greater diversity of partners. While the Watch Group has continuously pushed for simplification, tools such as the Single Form, have become, according to interviewees, "very complicated for inputting information". One interviewee said the "ECHO project system is still so complicated that you need a Master's degree to understand it". Nonetheless, interviewees were keen to stress that substantial progress has been made over the years, culminating in a 2014 FPA which, on paper, is strong. While delays do occur and it could be more efficient, one interviewee noted that "it still basically fulfils its speedy function". Another interviewee said the current FPA is "good, well-structured, and has incorporated NGO feedback over time". This can be attributed to the work of the Watch Group and VOICE's role in facilitating it.

The Watch Group makes significant achievements year-on-year. In 2017 for example, the group carried out a survey on the liquidation process adding much-needed data and evidence into the ECHO-NGO dialogue. Moreover, having campaigned for improvements to the Humanitarian Implementation Plans (HIPs) process for over two years, the HIPs narrative was published earlier in 2017 than 2016 allowing partners to start working on their proposals earlier. Improvements in deadlines and the initial



consultation were also acknowledged by NGOs. The continuously high participation rate in Watch Group meetings (consistently above 90 percent) is testament to the added-value that members perceive from participating in it. As one interviewee remarked, “sometimes we need to take a step back and appreciate how different things would have been if the Watch Group wasn’t there [...] the group has managed to change many things, much more than we realise”.

### *Trust, openness and transparency*

Both the NGO partners and ECHO agree that, overall, the work of the Watch Group has contributed towards creating trust and understanding between the two parties. Over time the Watch Group has become a serious and formal interlocutor, and ECHO has become willing to consult it on important matters. As noted by one interviewee, “ECHO wants to gauge the temperature and feeling of what is happening in the NGO community and this is the only way to get it in a constructive and organised manner”. Another stated that the “presence of the Watch Group absolutely helps build trust with ECHO”. Similarly, ECHO interviewees noted that the Watch Group “helps to bring topics to the table on a more constructive basis than would otherwise be possible”.

ECHO is an extremely large donor, working in a wide range of humanitarian crises through a diversity of NGOs partners, all operating under the complexity of the FPA. In light of this, the role of the Watch Group as specialist technical experts is invaluable and a good resource for ECHO. They help to build understanding between donor and partner through facilitating dialogue. One Task Force member recalled that during their first meetings between the FPA Watch Group and ECHO, the exchange was very formal and distant, while “during the more recent meetings, the dialogue has been more open and friendlier”. Closer contact between ECHO and partners has certainly led to an improved perception of one another through a better understanding of context, intentions and constraints. Through ECHO’s decision-making being explained to its partners via the group, NGOs are better placed to understand those decisions, and subsequently to either accept them or, using their vast expertise and knowledge, propose alternatives which better suit them but still match the objectives of ECHO. Interviewees generally agreed that ECHO performs better than other Commission services and other donors in terms of openness and transparency, with one noting that “while ECHO is far from being perfect, there is real discourse which is not only a façade, [while] access to DEVCO is a lot more complicated, as it is bigger, more bureaucratic, and has heavier rules and regulations, making it hard to steer what they put on the table”.

Nonetheless, some challenges between ECHO and its NGOs partners have been highlighted during the interviews. Some interviewees pointed to a lack of openness and transparency in recent years in the DG. One pointed to a “general and increasing lack of transparency in ECHO with management asking for doors to be closed”. Examples of this include the introduction of the Cash Guidance and the introduction of new Key Results Indicators or new sub-sections in the Single Form, all without prior

consultation with the Watch Group. However, ECHO seeks to communicate in other ways: a newsletter is disseminated four to five times a year, detailing relevant news and updating partners on recent decision-making and initiatives or new rules of compliance, and it also updates its website and database of online FAQs on a regular basis.

Internal changes within ECHO have also created challenges. In line with broader changes in the humanitarian sector and the European Commission, ECHO's status and mandate has shifted greatly since its inception in 1992. In its original form, ECHO – then the European Community Humanitarian Office – was straightforwardly an office with a clear mandate using NGOs as implementing partners. This changed in 2004 when ECHO became an EU Directorate-General, and again in 2010 when the European Commission restructured its bureaucratic organisation, in the process combining humanitarian aid policymaking with that of civil protection creating a new-look DG ECHO. These structural changes have sometimes complicated ECHO's relations with NGOs and, in turn, the FPA Watch Group. The last internal restructuring took place in July 2016, placing partnership matters under ECHO D1 Unit (Policy Coordination, International and Multilateral Relations, Legal Affairs) making partnership one element among others and no longer a specific designated unit. This decision has not been explained to ECHO's NGO partners and has served to create confusion for partners regarding who to contact with questions or inquiries concerning their partner status. Interviewees were worried about the broader implications of internal changes within ECHO, with one noting there is a "concern that ECHO is increasingly moving to being managed like any other DG even though the good name of ECHO in terms of both projects and policy comes from the fact it is different, and it is only able to respond to big crises because of that".

Rapid turnover of ECHO staff has exacerbated the issues surrounding communication between ECHO and partners. For instance, during the last restructuring in July 2016, the official ECHO focal point specifically dedicated to Watch Group relations was not, until very recently and only following advocacy from the Watch Group, replaced<sup>14</sup>. When people within ECHO, including certain desk officers, who had cultivated strong working relationships with the Watch Group over an extended period leave their posts, they take their understanding of the group, their institutional memory, and their trust with them. Thus, NGOs often need time to rebuild relationships with their replacements, eroding the environment of stability and consistency that is central to enabling a prosperous ECHO-NGO relationship. As one interviewee noted, the "relationship with ECHO is at its best when ECHO staff are stable, allowing relationships between staff to develop". Another noted that "consistency is needed to build trust, as only over time can ECHO staff become aware of NGOs' expertise and added-value and in turn NGOs can understand the constraints that ECHO staff work under". Another warned that such changes "risk hampering the future work of the Watch Group and other structures as these things thrive on stability, consistency, and trust".

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<sup>14</sup> Note, this was not a replacement per se but rather a staff member of the legal unit was appointed as the focal point for the upcoming FPA consultation.

ECHO interviewees acknowledged the “disruptive effects of this turnover”, but also pointed out that “details regarding changes in ECHO management are publicly available on the European Commission website, and in any case of any confusion ECHO will respond to queries”. ECHO interviewees also noted that staff turnover is an issue on the NGO side too, with new NGO staff sometimes lacking the experience to prepare proposals or engage with ECHO. Moreover, NGOs have also restructured, with many forming families. It has often been difficult for ECHO to keep track of these changes, with their outward communication subsequently suffering through not reaching the right people. Moreover, over the years there has been a high amount of turnover within the FPA Watch Group. Sometimes representatives have attended only one meeting, or sent someone else in their place. Some members argue that rotation can be an advantage because it brings in fresh ideas and committed newcomers, but this turnover can endanger the consistency of the Group.

### *Partnership?*

Interviewees questioned the extent to which the relationship between ECHO and its NGO partners in the Watch Group, governed by the FPA, can be meaningfully labelled as a true “partnership”. The strength of this relationship has varied over the years, with a sense that following initial struggles in the late 1990s and early 2000s – when ECHO was still relatively nascent and figuring itself out – the relationship subsequently improved, before once again deteriorating in the past couple of years. In the build-up to the most recent FPA, introduced in 2014, NGOs found contact with ECHO to be strong, with regular and thorough consultation including word-by-word, article-by-article reviews of documentation in Watch Group and Task Force meetings with ECHO representatives, giving NGOs the opportunity to express concerns and receive updates on how their suggestions were being incorporated. One interviewee emphasised that they were “impressed with the negotiation of the latest FPA, in that NGOs could discuss all the points”.

However, following the signing of the 2014 FPA, NGOs have witnessed ECHO becoming, according to one interviewee, “more directive in their approach, often presenting their own predetermined plans to the Watch Group rather than using it as a forum for discussing issues and finding common solutions with NGOs”. Following its signing, additional matters from the policy side were introduced with limited consultation, such as the Key Results and Outcome Indicators (KRIs and KOIs), visibility criteria, the financial thresholds, and the resilience and gender-age markers, in what one interviewee described as a “take it or take it” approach. Certain meetings, such as information meetings on the HIPs, were presented as engagement but in reality contained little opportunity for NGO input. In light of ECHO making several amendments to the 2008 FPA after its release, the Watch Group repeatedly advocated for continuity in the current 2014 FPA, however these changes ignored these calls. Many of ECHO’s NGO partners perceived this as an attempt to align the content of proposals with ECHO policy in a non-transparent way. Not only did this add serious

administrative burden on NGOs but the use of those indicators and their potential benefit remains uncertain to NGOs.

One interviewee argued that, today, “ECHO can be directive and imposing, treating NGOs as subcontractors rather than partners” while another stated that “it feels like it is no longer really a partnership, but rather a contractual obligation”. Another argued that “ECHO is dictating what the response should look like, which partners should do it and how, which takes away from partnership and humanitarian principles”. While the FPA provides for partnership in quantitative terms, with NGOs receiving sums of money in exchange for measurable results, the issue for NGOs is the qualitative aspect of the partnership. Through pushing NGOs on indicators and markers, ECHO limits the added-value of its NGO partners, failing to fully incorporate their capacity, strengths and expertise and pre-determining the operational approach. To realise the full potential of the ECHO-NGO partnership, as one interviewee argued, “ECHO needs to talk to its partners, understand the needs of a crisis, the appropriate operational response, and work constructively with NGOs who are the best humanitarian aid providers”.

Changes in the global humanitarian system help explain ECHO’s increasing tendency to pre-determine operational approaches and be more hands-on with partners. These external changes have put ECHO under more and more pressure to defend their activities on the basis of impact, results, and accountability, needing to demonstrate its efficiency and effectiveness at all times. This has led ECHO to create a system in which they can more easily defend their decisions and budget to stakeholders with quantifiable results attained through packing more data collection tools – such as the KRIs and markers – into the FPA, as well as leading them to favouring larger contracts. This has created a complex, overly-uniform, and administratively burdensome FPA system.

These pressures have also led to, on occasion, the needs-based premise of the EU’s aid delivery being perceived as being compromised. ECHO’s humanitarian aid funding has risked becoming politicised. Global political events such as the migration crisis have pushed ECHO towards becoming increasingly accountable to the European political scene, raising concerns among NGOs that the humanitarian response is being too strongly guided by the EU’s broader policy concerns, with ECHO becoming more directive in defining the operational approach that NGOs are asked to follow. In this way, funding is perceived by partners as being, according to one interviewee, “unevenly spread across crises and disconnected from its grounding in the humanitarian principles and global needs”. This is exacerbated by internal changes within ECHO. Since 2011-12, the policy unit has been built up within ECHO and, as the FPA serves as the main tool for ECHO of securing compliance from its NGO partners, the policy-related demands and interests of that unit have come to encroach on FPA matters. The FPA, conceived as a legal and administrative tool strongly grounded in the humanitarian principles which rule out politicised aid, has subsequently risked becoming burdened with policy issues.

ECHO interviewees acknowledged the constraints under which they have to work, particularly in terms of funding and budgetary issues. In recent years, the overall amount of money available to ECHO has not increased proportionally to the rapidly increasing needs around the world, with competition for funding increasing between different EU policy areas, different crises, and of course between partners too. They noted that this issue is here to stay and that they regularly communicate these constraints to the Watch Group and ECHO partners in general, seeking understanding while reaffirming ECHO's adherence to the humanitarian principles and the needs-based character of humanitarian aid.

Despite these challenges, the Watch Group has maintained its constructive spirit in its dialogue with ECHO. In order to revive a sense of partnership in the daily work between ECHO and NGOs, the Watch Group has used positive examples to build upon and to be replicated wherever possible. For example, substantial progress has been made in the HIPs consultation process over the last two years.

Although the most concrete manifestation of partnership between ECHO and its partners is the FPA, partnership is not limited to it and occurs in other fora. Certainly, while ECHO interviewees emphasised the utility of the group, they noted that "it is not the only channel through which ECHO wants to communicate with its partners". Similarly, NGO interviewees noted that partnership is a broader issue, with one stating that the "revision of the FPA is not the sole concern, we want to be able to negotiate with ECHO regarding the overall environment of which the FPA is one brick, seeking to influence how ECHO manages its NGO partnerships, and how they implement and run their different projects". Thanks to the FPA Watch Group, partnership has concretised on other issues, and in this way the Watch Group serves a wider partnership transcending purely FPA matters.

# FROM THE FPA TO A BROADER PARTNERSHIP

## 1. Operational Partnership

Close communication between the partners on the one hand and ECHO desk officers and field staff responsible for projects and country programming on the other is an important part of the effective implementation of ECHO's humanitarian programme. This is one area which many NGOs recognise as a primary element of the partnership with ECHO. Good relationships between NGOs and ECHO staff in the field as well as with desk officers are seen as particularly important for the success of projects, and must be carefully maintained by NGOs. NGOs consider these relationships as opportunities to influence ECHO's geographical strategies. However, these relationships are not seamless, and as noted above, opportunity for bilateral dialogue with desk officers has narrowed in recent years. It is also important to ensure that the interests pushed in these exchanges align with the interests of the Watch Group as a whole.

## 2. Annual Partners Meeting

While this is one of the central partnership events of ECHO's year, many NGOs perceive the Annual Meeting as a top-down affair.

Each year ECHO holds a General Meeting bringing together all of its partners under one roof.

Typically, the European Commissioner for Humanitarian Aid and Crisis Management (currently Christos Stylianides) and senior ECHO personnel will address partners, often outlining their plans for next year's strategy. Throughout the years, ECHO have experimented with different formats for the meeting, in more recent years organising workshops to give partners more opportunity to participate, while VOICE seeks to collaborate with ECHO to ensure that the programme is relevant for NGO partners and that NGOs are sufficiently involved. However, ECHO's own objectives for the meeting could be more clearly articulated and NGOs would like more scope for real dialogue and exchange with ECHO at the event, with workshops often playing out as presentations from ECHO staff rather than interactive two-way exercises.

## 3. VOICE's Ongoing Input

VOICE's relationship with ECHO was built-up with the facilitation of the FPA Watch Group, however, VOICE's mandate and work plan has grown substantially in the intervening years and now goes far beyond FPA matters. Alongside its FPA Watch

Group, VOICE currently has a Working Group on Disaster Risk Reduction, Resilience, and the Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus (the “From DRR to Resilience” Working Group) and a Task Force covering the Grand Bargain process. VOICE’s work in recent years has expanded to cover a range of large policy and strategy areas, such as resilience, the Comprehensive Approach, and now the Integrated Approach within the framework of the European Global Strategy, as well as the EU budget, EU Trust Funds and more recently issues of anti-money laundering and counter terrorism. However, VOICE still maintains its core objective of defending the importance of the humanitarian principles and the needs-based approach through strong advocacy around the implementation of the European Consensus for Humanitarian Aid and the need for timely and predictable humanitarian funding.

Moreover, VOICE has often supported ECHO in developing its policies. Through bringing NGOs together, coordinating the creation of consolidated input into ECHO surveys or facilitating exchange, VOICE has ensured the expertise and perspectives of NGO partners are reflected in ECHO policy. For example, VOICE and its members have contributed to the development of ECHO remote management guidelines, protection guidelines, and so on. At EU-level, ECHO and VOICE collaborate regularly and strengthen one another’s position, jointly defending the specificity of humanitarian aid and respect of the humanitarian principles. VOICE and its members recognise the external pressures ECHO faces and seeks to support them in remedying these and maintaining their “independent” decision making process to ensure needs-based and principled humanitarian aid. VOICE helps ECHO in convincing the EU institutions of the necessity of humanitarian aid, for example the two collaborate in ensuring the EU budget for humanitarian aid remains sufficient, something made possible thanks to trust between the two parties gained over some 25 years.

#### 4. ECHO’s Investment in Partnership

On top of FPA consultations, ECHO actively seeks to engage with its NGO partners through investing in other initiatives, such as its helpdesk, which has greatly increased the reachability of the DG. Partners can submit questions to the helpdesk via email or telephone, receiving technical support and information. The helpdesk pledges to respond to 99 percent of questions within five working days.

Moreover, NGOs and ECHO engage in training sessions and workshops, held throughout Europe and in the field. ECHO, through an external contractor, organises regular training sessions for partners around themes such as the Single Form, the audit process, and preparation of the final report, as well as a series of distance learning courses on similar topics consisting of video lectures and other downloadable material. Similarly, partners have also organised training sessions with the involvement of ECHO staff, while other exercises sponsored by ECHO and mainly intended for ECHO field staff have included large numbers of partner participants. Both NGO and ECHO staff cited training events as good opportunities to build relationships with partners. Learning collaboratively and exchanging experiences on topics of mutual interest has

helped to develop recognition of the perspectives and commitments of the other party. On interviewee stated that “ECHO trainings are brilliant, high in quality and the fact they are free is amazing [...] DEVCO is nowhere near initiating anything like this”.



# CONCLUSIONS

All interviewees testified to the added-value of the FPA Watch Group and emphasised that without this body, NGO input into FPA procedures would be much reduced and relations with ECHO would be different. Despite some inevitable issues, the group has served as an invaluable means of gathering, sharing, and disseminating information, as well as helping to facilitate dialogue with ECHO, increasing trust between the DG and NGOs. Successive Watch Groups have secured several successes regarding revisions of the FPA, making ground towards the ultimate objectives of simplification, diversity, flexibility, and longer-term funding. Interviewees were also highly supportive of the role of VOICE in facilitating and supporting the group and its Task Force, preparing for and following-up on meetings, and positioning itself as a readily-available point-of-contact for ECHO NGO partners.

## *Lessons learned*

- The Watch Group has served as an example both within the EU, where other Commission DGs have adopted a similar notion of “partnership”, and externally at Member State level. The Watch Group should use past experiences and continue the examples of good practice highlighted in this briefing when engaging in the FPA 2021 consultation phase. The issue of stability is a key concern: having made continuous changes to the agreements in the years following the entry into force of both the 2008 and 2014 FPAs, ECHO must ensure such changes are minimised this time around.
- Compared to other donors, ECHO operates effectively despite considerable internal and external constraints. Nonetheless, ECHO should strive to be as open as possible with NGOs, ensuring they are consulted on FPA issues in the spirit of the negotiations for the 2014 FPA, rather than presenting something after it has been finalised as happened too often in the years after. In this way, NGOs can contribute as partners in accordance with the European Consensus on Humanitarian Aid, providing their expertise, field experience, and added-value.

- The Watch Group is a unique and extremely important body that is valued by ECHO and the NGO community alike. Over the years, through close work with ECHO, it has made several notable achievements not only to the FPAs themselves but to the broader ECHO-NGO partnership, increasing dialogue, openness, and trust. The group's legitimacy is reinforced by its representativeness and its prominence should be maintained going forwards.

# REFERENCES

## Interviews

This paper is based on interviews undertaken in person or over Skype/phone in 2004 and 2018:

### 2004

- Jeannette Adriaenssens (International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies)
- Jane Backhurst (World Vision)
- Cecilie Bjornskov-Johansen (Dan Church Aid)
- Rachel Hastie (Oxfam GB)
- Simonetta Risaio (Handicap International)
- Chiel Roelands (ICCO)
- Gianni Rufini (formerly of VOICE)
- Jean Saslawsky (Medecins du monde)
- Anne Simon (formerly of CARE International)
- Matthias Sommer (German Agro Action)
- Jennifer Tangney (formerly of VOICE)
- Additional input from Tearfund, Danish Refugee Council and Mercy Corps Scotland
- ECHO officials

### 2017/18

- Mags Bird (Mission East)
- Ruth Faber (EU-CORD)
- Sonia Giannone (UNHCR)
- Veronika Ivanova (Red Cross EU)
- Caroline Monmarchon (Save the Children EU)
- Carolina Morgado (CARE International)
- Nils Rocklin (Oxfam International)
- Elvira Rodriguez Escudeiro (La Chaîne de l'Espoir)
- Leszek Tur (Polish Humanitarian Action)
- ECHO officials

## Documents

### European Union

- *Council Regulation (EC) No 1257/96 of 20 June 1996 concerning humanitarian aid*
- *Revision of the FPA: Concept Paper* (ECHO Unit B2, June 2007)
- *The European Consensus on Humanitarian Aid* (December 2007)
- *Evaluation of DG ECHO's Legal Framework for Funding of Humanitarian Actions: Final Report* (ECHO, June 2012)
- *Partners' Conference 2012: Improving the Partnership Agreements* (ECHO, October 2012)
- *Frequently Asked Questions: FPA Application Procedure* (September 2013)
- *Revision of the Partnership Agreements: State of Play and Main Changes* (ECHO Unit C3, October 2013)
- *Comparison Table: 2008 Framework Partnership Agreement vs. 2014 Framework Partnership Agreement for NGOs* (ECHO, 2014)

### VOICE/Watch Group Notes

- *More than just a bank: The revision of ECHO's Framework Partnership Agreement with humanitarian agencies* (November 1997)
- *One year after the 2008 FPA* (July 2009)
- *Working together under the FPA: A 'living discussion document' on improving partnership between DG ECHO and NGO partners, with views to the elaboration of the 5<sup>th</sup> FPA* (October 2011)
- *The European Consensus on Humanitarian Aid: An NGO Perspective* (VOICE, May 2014)
- *Towards the next FPA: Recommendations for an inclusive and constructive negotiation process* (VOICE, May 2017)
- *Towards a new FPA: State of play and ways forward* (June 2017)

### VOICE documents

- *VOICE Out Loud 17: Humanitarian Donors: Policy and Practice* (May 2013)
- *VOICE Out Loud 19: A Closer Look at EU Humanitarian Aid* (July 2014)

### WG and TF Terms of Reference/Work Plans/Minutes

- Dialogue Group Meeting Minutes 1994-1998
- FPA Watch Group Meeting Minutes 1999-2017
- Task Force Meeting Minutes 1999-2017

- *FPA Watch Group Terms of Reference* (February 2016)
- *FPA Watch Group: Draft Work Plan for 2017*

### The Framework Partnership Agreements

- 1 September 1993
- 1 January 1999
- 1 January 2004
- 1 January 2008
- 1 January 2014

### Websites

- DG ECHO Partners' Website (<http://dgecho-partners-helpdesk.eu/>)
- DG ECHO Website (<http://ec.europa.eu/echo/>)
- VOICE website (<https://ngovoice.org/fpa-watch-group>)