

The European Consensus on Humanitarian Aid – an NGO Perspective

Brussels, 19 May 2014

VOICE organised an event to launch its study 'The European Consensus on Humanitarian Aid: an NGO Perspective', on Monday 19 May. The event aimed to give an overview of the Member States' (MS) and NGOs' engagement with the European Consensus on Humanitarian Aid (here after Consensus) and how it informed MS' humanitarian policy and practice.

MS of the European Union, the European Commission (EC) and the European Parliament (EP) reached agreement on the European Consensus on Humanitarian Aid in 2007. In 2008 a five year Action Plan to implement this common vision was agreed. In 2013-2014 the EC initiated an evaluation of the impact of the Consensus and its Action Plan. In parallel in 2013, VOICE commissioned DARA to undertake a study of NGOs' views on the crucial aspects of the Consensus and its relevance for MS' policies and practices concerning humanitarian aid.

Mr. Youri Saadallah – Director Norwegian Refugee Council Europe – welcomed the audience on behalf of VOICE president, Nicolas Borsinger.

Ms. Kathrin Schick – VOICE Director – presented the panel and introduced the study and its origins. VOICE members have been engaged with and committed to the EU Consensus since 2007. On the one hand, it is a good framework that should guide policies and practice. On the other hand, one of the issues mentioned in the 2011 mid-term review of the Action Plan was that MS' use and implementation of the Consensus could be made more visible.

Why an NGO perspective? NGOs deliver 60-80% of humanitarian aid, so they are very important actors in the field. As such, half of ECHO funding goes to NGOs. While NGOs have not signed the Consensus, they have contributed to shape it, and consider it a solid framework which should guide Member States' humanitarian action.

Mr. Ed Schenkenberg van Mierop – Executive Director of DARA (cf. PowerPoint)

- Key themes:
 - MS' humanitarian strategies and the degree to which the Consensus has informed these strategies and practices
 - Humanitarian principles
 - Added value of NGOs
 - Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR), Linking Relief, Rehabilitation and Development (LRRD), local capacity building
- Three caveats:
 - Not an exhaustive review of the entire Consensus
 - Only interviews with MS representatives from humanitarian departments
 - No field research done
- Methodology:
 - Desk review of all MS' humanitarian policies, as well as other documents relevant to the EU Consensus and the principal themes
 - Online survey, 97 responses of which more than 80% were from NGOs and less than 20% from MS)
 - 8 focus countries (UK, France, Germany, Netherlands, Spain, Czech Republic, Denmark and Italy): 7 focus groups gathering 85 representatives of 62 organisations
 - 12 in-depth interviews with MS and NGO representatives and EU Commission
- Overall findings:
 - Many MS' policies refer to the Consensus, some very extensively (specifically those written after its signing), others have it much less referenced.

- MS and NGOs agree on the value of the Consensus since it reaffirms the humanitarian principles and consider it very important. But they disagree on its application in programming and practice.
- Humanitarian principles: MS and NGOs have different views to what degree humanitarian principles guide decision-making.
 - Politicisation: NGOs recognise that a crisis often needs to be on Foreign Ministries' political agendas for a good international response; but at the same time, it may lead to the instrumentalization of aid. This issue needs much more discussion among NGOs.
 - Funding decisions: Funding is usually more available where the countries are part of the foreign policy agenda or if the country is already a partner. There are some exceptions (like CAR) that are more needs-based. Generally the feeling is that when humanitarian aid is able to operate outside the political limelight, it is more needs-based; but if it is part of the political agenda, it can be directly influenced by it.
- Added-value of NGOs: The existence of a coordination mechanism among NGOs is a benefit, especially where there are consultation mechanisms between government departments and NGOs. While these mechanisms do not translate into more funding they result in better relations between the two. However many NGOs feel that their governmental counterparts are interested in the field-level information because many governments do not have an extensive field presence. The question is then what this information is used for. There is a preference of governments for funding to the UN agencies; Netherlands is a strong example of this. In addition, despite the Consensus, there has been an increase in the administrative burden. What should humanitarian governmental services expect vs. what is feasible? There is a need for debate at national level.
- DRR, LRRD, local capacity: These issues have an important place in the Consensus, but those topics receive significantly less response in the study. The Consensus does not seem to have influenced these discussions; there are probably other instruments more likely to do so.

Ms. Anne Street – Senior Humanitarian Policy Advisor of CAFOD and Steering Committee member for VOICE Consensus Study – spoke about NGOs interest and engagement with the Consensus and its Action Plan, and elaborated on number of the study's recommendations.

- Findings: Whilst civil servants in MS' humanitarian departments reported a high level of familiarity with the Consensus, it is not sufficiently known amongst humanitarians working in NGOs. In fact, the Consensus is a hidden gem and NGOs need to work to highlight it more, and work with national governments to ensure they use it as a lens to work through.
- VOICE study recommendations:
 - **Follow-up Action Plan** is recommended as a tool to support a coordinated and collective approach to agreed priorities by MS and EU institutions and a means by which they can internally reflect on their policy and practice in relation to the Consensus. MS' reporting for this should be open and transparent with eventually a yearly discussion and reflection with NGOs and other humanitarian actors at the national level. The Action Plan could include a peer review mechanism for MS to work together in supporting one another, learning from each-other and sharing best practice. This would enable governments with fewer resources and less humanitarian expertise to learn from some of the larger MS who are global leaders in the field of humanitarian donorship.
 - How to frame the Action Plan to move beyond simply tracking fulfilment of agreed actions to examining how these actions actually advance the Consensus and principled humanitarian action of MS and the European institutions? Parliaments and NGOs use it to systematically **monitor governmental actions** and hold them to account against their commitments.
 - **Dialogue between humanitarian NGOs and the military** can be raised at national level. For example, there is an NGO-military contact group in the UK where NGOs meet with civil servants from different services (foreign affairs, development, humanitarian aid, defence...) to discuss a range of issues and country-specific themes.
 - **Reduction of the administrative burden for NGOs:** the situation has improved from ECHO's side (e.g. with the new FPA), but in many national contexts it is getting more challenging for NGOs. Advocacy at national and wider level with a concerted approach is necessary, e.g. raising

this issue with the Good Humanitarian Donorship (GHD) forum and getting them to examine the feasibility of greater harmonisation of templates and administrative demands.

Although it is challenging to raise these policy issues with civil servants and politicians, and even with NGO colleagues, there are creative ways to approach this, to look for allies and to insist on commitments.

Ms. Karen Miller – 3rd Secretary, Emergency & Recovery Unit, Irish Aid – explained Ireland’s attachment to the Consensus and to the Action Plan and brought a MS perspective to the discussion.

- Awareness of the Consensus: There is a limited awareness of the Consensus beyond those working in humanitarian policy in the case of MS and a mixed level of awareness in the broader humanitarian community. Ireland tried very much to be proactive and also quite pragmatic in trying to raise awareness of the Consensus both in the EU institutions and with new and emerging donors.
- Cooperation:
 - There are an increasing number of non-traditional donors and implementing agencies that may have a different approach to the delivery of aid. It is thus important to find ways to cooperate and work with these new partners.
 - It is also important to learn to cooperate better within the system – both at national and European level – to ensure that there is joint operation and coherent response to crisis situations.
 - Efforts need to be placed on an ongoing emphasis to reinforce understanding of the specificity of humanitarian aid and the Consensus across the Foreign Affairs, in the Parliament, in the Defence Forces, and across all the departments of government.
- Humanitarian principles: There has to be a continuous promotion of the importance of the core humanitarian principles. While an EU holistic approach to crisis situations is needed in search of more sustainable solutions, it is also crucial that the provision of humanitarian assistance continues to be based on needs and not linked to political objectives.
- Comprehensive Approach: The reaffirmation of a principled and needs-based approach to humanitarian action in the Council Conclusions, as well as a very explicit reference to the Consensus, is a significant step forward.
- Implementation: Politicization of the humanitarian objectives is still a problem, as well as other weaknesses like the commitments in coordination and coherence, accountability and donorship such as in the aid continuum. To ensure the implementation of the commitments collectively, everybody should raise awareness of the Consensus across MS’ systems.
- Follow-up Action Plan: It is critical to have some form of follow-on implementation framework to ensure that the Consensus remains alive, but it will be a challenge to develop an Action Plan which takes into consideration variation across 28 MS and the Commission without adopting a one-size-fits-all approach resulting in an overly broad Plan that is difficult to measure.
- Reduction of the administrative burden: More needs to be done to seek a more harmonised approach, but it is also important to recognise the political and administrative context in which donors are operating. MS do not have the same legislative frameworks or harmonised budget cycles, audit requirements or understanding of what constitutes a result in the humanitarian context.
- Next steps: Initiatives such as this study, this event and other ongoing advocacy activities remain more vital than ever. In that regard the upcoming the World Humanitarian Summit (WHS) provides an extremely vital opportunity to reaffirm the commitments to the Consensus and to promote and protect the core humanitarian principles which underpin it.

Ms. Leonor Nieto Leon – Head of Unit A/1 Strategy, Co-ordination, Inter-Institutional Relations, DG ECHO – explained how the VOICE study complements the ECHO evaluation.

- Common findings: The evaluation is not yet final, but some parts can be advanced.
 - The Consensus remains the core founding document for the common vision on European humanitarian policy. However, there are gaps between the Consensus and its implementation. A lot was achieved after the Consensus (COHAFA, ECHO policies...), but more needs to be done

to make it live and operational. The evaluation will thus recommend the development of a **follow-up Action Plan**.

- There is a **lack of awareness** of the Consensus, not only outside the humanitarian community, but also within the community (HQ vs. field). The Comprehensive Approach is an opportunity to raise further the awareness among colleagues. The European Commission (ECHO) position is that 'we are in but out' – 'in' in the sense of ringing alarm bells, but 'out' as humanitarian aid is provided in accordance to the principles and on the basis of the needs.
 - Another part identified that needs further work is **coordination**. The creation of the COHAFA is a big achievement and there is a lot of information sharing which is a first step. It is the task of the Commission to promote coordination between EC' and MS' actions, but also with partners.
 - Other areas that need more work are: 1) **DRR** – the post-Hyogo process brings an opportunity to raise it further in the agenda; 2) **civ-mil** – ECHO now engaged with the EEAS and the militaries in a very constructive way, ensuring that there is no blurring of lines during military operations.
 - On the **administrative burden**, ECHO tried to simplify processes with the new FPA. A 'European FPA' could perhaps tackle the diversity across the 28 MS, but it would be extremely challenging. It is worth discussing it in COHAFA and also at the GHD forum.
- What's next? After the presentation of the evaluation to the COHAFA, the final results will be presented in a public event. It will be up to the future Commission to decide what to do in response to the evaluation. It will be important to build an 'ECHO-friends' network in the new EU institutions so that humanitarian concerns are well understood: the targets must be the DEVE as well as AFET, SEDE and BUDG Committees in the EP; but also the new High Representative and the new President of the Council. It will be a very challenging year, but also full of opportunities to raise awareness.

The participants then had a session of questions and answers around several of topics of the presentations.

Mr. Nicolas Borsinger – VOICE President – closed the event by reinforcing the idea of the Consensus as a hidden gem and by reminding that the first benchmark, the WHS, is along the road.

VOICE (*Voluntary Organisations in Cooperation in Emergencies*) is a network representing 82 European NGOs active in humanitarian aid worldwide. VOICE is the main NGO interlocutor with the EU on emergency aid, relief, rehabilitation and disaster risk reduction. It represents and promotes the values and specific features of humanitarian NGOs.

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