



Emma Bonino's hallmark on ECHO – An Enduring Imprint

 **KOULAIMAH Andrea (ECHO)**
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When Commissioner Bonino took over the political direction of ECHO in January 1995, the “European Community Humanitarian Office” was a very young service, barely three years old.

As one of two Italian Commissioners, Emma Bonino was also responsible, in the Santer Commission, for the (unrelated) fisheries and consumer policy areas. Although she was tenacious on all three portfolios, humanitarian aid was closest to her heart and to the values she fought for throughout her entire life: gender equality, human rights, world hunger, international justice, and many other battles for which “ten lives won’t be enough”, as she said years later.



Young ECHO and a nascent legal framework

The decision to set up a service dedicated to humanitarian aid had been taken on 6 November 1991 with the objective to make “European Community [emergency and humanitarian] aid more effective and visible”. Until then, humanitarian aid was managed through ad hoc decisions and split over several budget lines, different services and programmes, lacking visibility and overall strategic steer, a situation made all the more unsustainable by expanding humanitarian expenditure.

By the time ECHO was born, on 1st April 1992, a full-blown war was being waged on European soil and the Maastricht Treaty had just been signed, with the ambition of setting up a Common Foreign Security Policy.



As Commissioner Bonino took over the humanitarian portfolio, the resources devoted to humanitarian aid had increased sevenfold since 1990 and, with 760 million ECUs (European Currency Unit) spent in 1994, the European Commission was the single largest humanitarian donor (not including the Member States) ahead of the US. The expenditure level remained steady over her mandate, with € 812 million

spent in 1999.

It was therefore critical to put in place solid administrative processes and a legal framework. Four months into the Santer mandate, in May 1995, the Commission presented to the Council and to the European Parliament a proposal for a Humanitarian Aid Regulation (HAR), which was adopted by the legislator on 20 June 1996. 30 years later, the Council regulation No 1257/96 remains the legal basis for ECHO’s humanitarian work. The basic tenets of the Regulation have remained the bedrock of EU humanitarian action for three decades and for the foreseeable future, namely;

- the “life-saving” objectives of humanitarian aid,
- the centrality of the four humanitarian principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence,
- the inclusion in the scope of the Regulation of both disaster preparedness and self-sufficiency,
- and the operational tools -from partnership with NGOs, United Nations and Red Cross, to direct action by the Commission itself.

ECHO as donor, operator and visible humanitarian actor

The humanitarian donor/operator duality of ECHO was perhaps more pronounced at the time than it is today: with direct action in former Yugoslavia, ECHO was directly purchasing relief assistance to affected populations, organising their storage and transport and ensuring the distribution through a variety of partners, such as the Red Cross. The direct action that lasted the longest is the air services “ECHO Flight” that started in Somalia in 1994. This method of work has evolved from direct implementation to the hybrid ReliefEU model in which, with the exception of the transport broker contract, DG ECHO funds partners for implementation while retaining the operational steer. Nevertheless there is continuity in the narrative, around “complementarity” and “non substitution” with the UN, Red Cross and NGO response, gap-filling, and increased effectiveness.

Commissioner Bonino very much emphasised the visibility of EU humanitarian aid: her own charisma certainly helped in this respect. Some of the communication initiatives she took did not survive her term in office. One such initiative was the organisation for three successive years of the “ECHO Television and Radio Awards”, rewarding high-quality coverage of humanitarian affairs in six categories:



1. People on the move-a television documentary on the humanitarian consequences of sudden or forced population movements;
2. In the minds of the people-a TV documentary on the psychological trauma in crisis situations;
3. Forgotten conflicts-TV coverage of a long-running crisis forgotten by the mainstream;
4. Vulnerable groups-TV coverage of the hazards encountered by women, children and the elderly in rebuilding their lives;
5. Broadcast commitment-to a radio or TV station for consistent, high-quality coverage of humanitarian issues;
6. Radio award-for the most incisive and analytical coverage of an emergency or humanitarian crisis.

The first of these Award ceremonies took place in Dublin on 9 December 1996. No edition took place in 1999, probably owing to the fall of the Santer Commission, and it was not resumed later.

Bonino's human rights, gender equality and humanitarian leadership

Throughout her life and her political career, Emma Bonino was an outspoken activist defending human rights, international justice and gender equality. During her tenure, as European Commissioner for humanitarian affairs, she challenged the doctrine that aid agencies must remain silent and politically detached. In all the tributes made following her passing away on 11 September 2026, she is particularly remembered for her contribution to the defence of Human Rights, International Humanitarian Law and international justice, and for her fight for gender equality. During her mandate as Commissioner for humanitarian affairs, she was consistent with her values and principles and incorporated these priorities in the work of the Commission in a very visible manner. These priorities are, still, at the forefront of the EU’s principled humanitarian stance.

Emma Bonino’s first missions as Commissioner were to ex-Yugoslavia and to Rwanda. Both were the scene of International Humanitarian Law violations, war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide. The Commissioner was one of the instigators of the International Criminal Court, and she led the Commission’s Delegation addressing the Rome Diplomatic Conference that concluded the negotiations of the Rome Statute on 17 July 1998. Emma Bonino was a staunch defender of international justice and believed that the ICC could be a deterrent for future perpetrators.



Speaking out for women in Bosnia and Afghanistan

In Bosnia, Commissioner Bonino was confronted with the plight of women and girls as victims of sexual violence and rape as a weapon of war. In her address of 11 July 1996 to the women of Srebrenica project in Tuzla, she said:

“The message I am bringing you today [...] is a message of solidarity and hope: you are not alone. And our message of hope is not just words on paper. Our thoughts, the thoughts of women worldwide, are with you, but goodwill alone won’t help. I am a practical woman, and this message comes with a package of practical assistance. I am personally taking responsibility for delivering some of the means of rebuilding lives, in the hope of creating a future for you, the women of Srebrenica, and for your children. For the European Union, this is our way of moving beyond empathy and concern”.

In Afghanistan, on 27 September 1997, Commissioner Bonino defied the Taliban who had taken the control of Kabul: she was visiting a women’s hospital with a group of journalists, including the famous CNN anchor Christiane Amanpour, when the whole delegation was arrested by the Ministry for Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice. Bonino and her entourage were released three and a half hours later, and the Taliban Foreign Ministry issued a formal apology. The discrimination and repression of Afghan women was unbearable for Emma Bonino and the objective of her trip was to draw international media attention so that Afghan women would not be forgotten. In 1998, on International Women’s Day, she launched a campaign “Flower for the women of Kabul” in close partnership with the European Parliament to raise awareness on the discrimination faced by Afghan women, a real “gender apartheid” according to her own words. A generation later, as Afghan women face again the discriminatory and repressive policies of the Taliban regime, the media campaign of Commissioner Bonino should serve as inspiration.

Lasting legacy: a humanitarian vision

Humanitarian values and principles were at the core of Commissioner Bonino’s beliefs. She strongly believed, however, that humanitarian aid alone could not solve the crises that were facing the world at the end of last century. She was particularly sensitive to the use of humanitarian aid as a substitute to political action and she called upon development assistance to remain engaged in crisis contexts. In a speech on “principled humanitarian aid in an unprincipled world” at a conference co-organised with the Overseas Development Institution in London in 1997 she stated that “*if there is no foreign policy determination behind the European Union’s actions in any given crisis situation, humanitarian action, however justified, will remain a placebo, a drop in the ocean. My personal conclusion is that the aim for us cannot be to politicise humanitarian aid, it must rather be to make foreign policy more humanitarian*”.

Emma Bonino has certainly left an undeniable and, hopefully, indelible hallmark on EU humanitarian aid, and on DG ECHO in particular. The combination of her political judgement, her courage and her communication instinct shaped EU humanitarian policy for many decades and her visionary leadership turned the ambition behind the creation of ECHO in 1992 into a lasting reality. An unbroken lineage connects Bonino’s legacy, her speeches, the humanitarian aid regulation, or the Declaration of the Humanitarian summit that she convened in Madrid in December 1995 (signed by the EU, USAID, UN, ICRC, MSF and other INGO representatives) to the May 2026 communication on “defending values, driving reform, delivering impact: the EU’s humanitarian action in a shifting global order”. As Commissioner Lahbib put it “Today we are who we are because she believed we could be”.

