

Towards a simpler, more stable and timely programming cycle

HP Watch Group recommendations on the simplification of DG ECHO's HIPs process and programming cycle

KEY MESSAGE

Simplification should make the entire HIP cycle leaner, more predictable and more efficient for both DG ECHO and its partners. It should reduce avoidable requirements, duplication, revision rounds and delays while preserving accountability, useful information, humanitarian-specific approaches and the quality of the response.

AT A GLANCE

The HP Watch Group recommends actions in four mutually reinforcing areas:

1. Create a simplified and stable requirements environment.
2. Ensure coherent communication, transparency and dialogue.
3. Make the HIP cycle timely and predictable, from publication to contracting.
4. Embed simplification across digital systems and wider partnership processes.

Introduction

Humanitarian Implementation Plans (HIPs) translate DG ECHO's priorities and funding decisions into country- and crisis-level programming. Their content, timing, and subsequent proposal and contracting processes directly affect partners' ability to design and deliver timely, high-quality humanitarian responses.

The [EU's Joint Communication on Humanitarian Aid](#), DG ECHO's review of the Single Form and the planned transition to eGrants offer a unique opportunity to look broadly at the partnership processes surrounding the HIPs. Commitments to reduce administrative burden, simplify grant management and modernise digital systems should produce practical improvements throughout the HIP cycle, leading to leaner processes for both DG ECHO and its partners, ultimately resulting in more efficient and timely humanitarian responses.

This paper draws on VOICE's survey of 30 organisations, representing approximately 53% of DG ECHO's funding to NGOs in 2025, and on various Humanitarian Partnership Watch Group discussions over the years. While 66% described their 2026 HIP experience as mixed¹, 24% considered it mostly smooth or very smooth. Taken together, these findings suggest that the foundations for a predictable and efficient HIP process are already in place, but positive practices are not yet applied consistently across the cycle.

Priority I: A simplified and stable requirements environment

A stable requirements environment is a precondition for meaningful simplification. Partners need to know sufficiently early the exact set of rules and expectations from DG ECHO so that these can be incorporated into internal planning and proposal development. When requirements change shortly before or during the submission period, organisations must adapt systems, guidance and internal processes at the same time as they are developing proposals. This creates delays, additional workload for partners and DG ECHO and increases the likelihood of further clarification and revision rounds.

¹ Mixed: some proposals went smoothly, while others faced significant challenges.

1. Remove unnecessary requirements and duplication.

DG ECHO's simplification of the 2027 Single Form is a welcome first step. Removing unnecessary sections and annexes while retaining essential elements directly addresses a long-standing partner concern. Thus, we strongly support these efforts and encourage further progress in this direction while transitioning to e-Grants. At the same time, simplification should preserve the parts of the current structure that support project design and the humanitarian-specific features needed to work in volatile contexts. The same principle should apply to the HIP documents themselves. Making HIPs more usable does not necessarily mean making them uniformly shorter. Generic or duplicative contextual information could be reduced, while information that is essential for proposal preparation should be easier to identify. This includes operational priorities (including priority locations), sectoral expectations (including eventual preference for multi-sectoral projects/area-based/integrated approaches instead of stand-alone sector-specific intervention), funding parameters (including expected budget size of grants), cost-effectiveness considerations and context-specific requirements (including clear indication on the inclusion, or not, of Crisis Modifiers).

2. Set a clear annual cut-off date preventing changes during submission season.

Introduction of changes to the Single Form, templates, or new policy, legal or financial requirements during the submission period was identified by 50% of the respondents as one of the main obstacles to an efficient, timely and quality HIPs 2026 process, because of the significant disruption it can create for proposals' preparation. Therefore, the HP Watch recommends DG ECHO to set an annual fixed date, e.g. beginning of September, after which no changes can be made. Modifications to the Single Form, indicators, annexes, guidance, policy requirements and related digital fields should be consolidated into one coordinated annual package before this date, rather than introduced through successive updates during the proposal period. The number of new requirements introduced each year should remain limited, with their cumulative administrative impact on both DG ECHO and partners considered as part of the decision-making process.

3. Involve partners early in major reforms.

Early consultation will be particularly important for the more substantial changes planned alongside eGrants in 2028. Humanitarian partners should be involved while changes can still be shaped, so that requirements are proportionate, operationally relevant and supported by realistic transitional arrangements. It will be essential to ensure eGrants and related templates enable clear and accountable reporting by humanitarian partners while providing DG ECHO with the information needed for effective assessment, without creating additional or informal reporting requirements.

Priority II: Coherent communication, transparency and dialogue

Even stable and proportionate requirements can create unnecessary workload when they are communicated inconsistently. HP Watch Group members reported discrepancies between HIP documents, guidance, APPEL and different language versions, as well as differences in how requirements are interpreted or applied across countries. These inconsistencies make it difficult for partners to identify the authoritative information and can lead to avoidable questions and proposal revisions.

1. Ensure coherence across documents and consistency in requirements interpretation across countries

DG ECHO should ensure that HIP documents, guidance, APPEL and related reference documents are updated in a coordinated manner and that partners can easily identify the applicable version. A consolidated change log should explain what has changed, when the change takes effect, which

documents or system fields are affected and whether partners need to take any action. Different language versions should be released at the same time and checked for substantive consistency. Establishing a hierarchy of documents would also help partners and ECHO staff resolve inconsistencies by clarifying which version takes precedence.

In addition, more consistent communication also depends on stronger coordination between headquarters and field offices. Requirements and guidance should be interpreted and applied in a comparable way across contexts, while retaining the flexibility needed to respond to country-specific realities. Where different approaches are necessary, the reasons should be made clear to partners.

2. Communicate expectations and consultations early and transparently

Clear communication is also needed on DG ECHO's expectations within each HIP. Members called for greater transparency regarding sectoral priorities, cost-effectiveness criteria, the selection process and expectations concerning consortia. Partners do not necessarily need more guidance, but they do need information that is specific enough to support sound decisions about how to submit a proposal.

Country-level consultations can play an important role in providing this clarity, but practice needs to become more consistent. Members welcomed more open consultations as a positive development, while noting that in some contexts they continue to involve only organisations already funded under the HIP. Hence, DG ECHO could consider establishing minimum standards for these consultations: they should be announced transparently, take place early enough to influence the HIP, explain how partners' input will be used and be open to all relevant certified partners, family members or implementing partners with operational experience (especially when the certified partner itself is not present in the country). This would give DG ECHO a broader evidence base while ensuring more equal access to information.

Focus on Consortia

Consortia can support complementary responses where there is a clear programmatic rationale and partners themselves see value in working together. However, consortia should not be assumed to reduce transaction costs or administrative burden overall. While they may reduce the number of agreements managed by DG ECHO, they can transfer additional coordination, compliance and administrative responsibilities to consortium members and may increase the overall burden for participating NGOs. This was reflected in the 2026 VOICE survey, in which 70% of respondents reported having encountered mandatory changes to consortium arrangements.

This makes consortia an important area for simplification. However, where DG ECHO expects or encourages applicants to work through a consortium, partners need to understand this early enough to assess the implications and organise an appropriate partnership before developing a proposal. DG ECHO should therefore communicate clearly, during country consultations or HIP preparation, what it expects or encourages regarding consortia, including, where relevant, the rationale for a consortium approach and any expectations concerning its composition or roles.

DG ECHO should also distinguish between establishing a new consortium, changing the composition of an existing consortium and joining a UN-led arrangement, as these situations involve different partnership arrangements and can create different coordination, compliance and administrative implications for NGOs. In each case, any requested change should be clearly explained, including the reason for the change and its implications for the organisations concerned, and sufficient time should be provided for partners to adapt their arrangements before submission.

Finally, direct dialogue between DG ECHO and participating NGOs should be preserved throughout the process, including where NGOs participate in UN-led consortia, so that operational concerns, responsibilities and the practical implications of changes can be discussed directly rather than relying solely on the consortium lead.

3. Maintain and rely on the dialogue platforms between DG ECHO and its partners.

The regular exchanges already taking place between DG ECHO and partners, including through the Humanitarian Partnership Watch Group on the HIPs, provide an important feedback loop for identifying recurring inconsistencies, unclear requirements and implementation challenges throughout the cycle. We strongly encourage maintaining this good practice, which enables operational experience to inform continuous improvements to the HIP process and helps address issues before the following cycle.

Priority III: make the HIP cycle timely and predictable

1. Preserve early publication, staggered deadlines and realistic preparation time.

Predictable timelines and sharing the HIP early enough are among the practices most valued by partners. In the 2026 survey, 73% of respondents identified clear dates, timeframes and deadlines in the HIPs as a positive feature. Members particularly valued early publication and the staggering of submission deadlines, which help organisations plan workloads and dedicate adequate time to proposal quality. These good practices should be maintained and accompanied by realistic minimum periods for proposal preparation (e.g. 6 weeks), taking into account the time organisations need to coordinate internally, with co-partners and implementing partners.

2. Reduce successive clarification and revision rounds.

The most frequently reported obstacle to an efficient and timely HIP process in the survey was the length of proposal evaluation and contracting, identified as such by 59% of respondents. Long or uncertain timelines, combined with repeated feedback rounds, reduce the efficiency gains created by well-planned initial deadlines. Hence, proposal evaluation should become more proportionate to reduce the number of back-and-forth rounds. Clear and consolidated feedback should be provided as early as possible, with the aim of reducing successive clarification and revision rounds. Where revisions remain necessary, feedback should distinguish between issues that are essential for the funding decision and points that can be addressed during implementation. Partners should also have greater visibility over the status and expected timing of evaluation and contracting, with delays communicated promptly.

In addition, greater transparency on how proposals are assessed would help partners better understand DG ECHO's priorities and tailor their proposals accordingly. While HIPs include assessment criteria, they do not indicate the relative weight or scores assigned to each criterion. Making the scoring system available would allow applicants to better understand which elements are prioritised in a specific HIP and context, and to reflect these priorities more clearly in their proposals. In addition, more detailed feedback to unsuccessful applicants, including a breakdown of scores against the different assessment criteria, would help partners improve future applications. While recognising that providing more detailed feedback would require additional effort from DG ECHO, this could ultimately support partners in submitting higher-quality proposals that are better aligned with DG ECHO's expectations and reduce the need for successive clarification and revision rounds.

3. Ensure reliable digital processes during submission.

The reliability of APPEL during the proposal season is an integral part of a timely and efficient process. Technical difficulties at periods of peak demand can undermine otherwise realistic deadlines. DG ECHO should ensure sufficient system capacity and clear contingency arrangements when technical problems affect submissions. As the transition to eGrants is prepared, lessons from the practical use of APPEL should inform system design, testing and support.

Priority IV: Embed simplification across digital systems and wider partnership processes

The transition to eGrants creates an opportunity to simplify the management of DG ECHO funding, but it also carries a risk of transferring corporate processes that are not adapted to humanitarian operations. The Joint Communication commits to modernising grant management through interoperable digital systems while safeguarding operational flexibility. This balance should guide the implementation of eGrants for humanitarian partners.

1. Ensure eGrants are well adapted to humanitarian operational realities.

Humanitarian partners should be involved early in the testing and implementation of the new system, while there is still scope to address operational and usability problems. Clear guidance and training will be important, but they cannot replace meaningful consultation or a realistic transition period. The Commission's corporate grant management environment should preserve the humanitarian-specific features and operational flexibility needed to manage projects in volatile and rapidly changing contexts.

2. Improve transparency and access to funding information.

The transition should improve, rather than reduce, access to funding information. Members highlighted the loss of operational information that had previously been available through EDRIS. A future system should provide accessible information on funded projects, country and sectoral allocations and transversal HIPs. This would support transparency and accountability, while helping partners coordinate, identify gaps and avoid unnecessary duplication.

3. Use donor harmonisation to reduce cumulative administrative burden.

The simplification of DG ECHO's processes should also be considered in the wider context of donor harmonisation. The Team Europe simplification agenda offers an opportunity for the Commission and EU Member States to align requirements and, where appropriate, recognise each other's certification and assurance processes, so that partners do not have to provide substantially the same information or undergo equivalent assessments separately for different donors. This could reduce the cumulative administrative burden on organisations receiving funding from several donors.

Proposals for common certification or reporting tools should therefore be assessed against whether they genuinely remove duplication and administrative layers for partners. Harmonisation should not mean alignment with the most restrictive requirements or weaken humanitarian principles, civil society diversity, operational flexibility or donor accountability. NGO partners should be involved in the design of any shared approaches to ensure that they are proportionate and workable in humanitarian contexts.

Conclusion and proposed way forward

DG ECHO's simplification agenda and the transition towards the next Multiannual Financial Framework provide a timely opportunity to improve the HIP process and overall programming cycle. The 2026 experience shows that many of the foundations already exist: partners value clear dates, early publication, staggered deadlines and efforts to make the Single Form leaner. The priority should now be to apply these practices more consistently and connect them across the full funding cycle.

Effective simplification should be visible in practical outcomes: fewer late changes, more stable and coherent requirements, fewer proposal revision rounds, faster contracting, reliable digital systems and clearer access to information. Achieving this will require continued dialogue and shared responsibility between DG ECHO and its partners. Early engagement will be particularly important as the more substantial changes planned for 2028 are developed.

The Humanitarian Partnership Watch Group stands ready to continue this dialogue, contribute operational evidence and support the development of a HIP process that is simpler and more efficient while preserving accountability, partnership quality and principled humanitarian action.