

# Interview with Hadja Lahbib, EU Commissioner for Equality; Preparedness and Crisis Management



- > 1. How does the European Commission, particularly DG ECHO, approach the balance between ensuring EU visibility and respecting the dignity and autonomy of people receiving humanitarian action? How to make sure collectively that people and communities receiving support are represented as people with agency?**

I truly believe that showing the EU's role in humanitarian aid and respecting the dignity and independence of the people we help go hand in hand. These two goals support each other. Everything we do is based on deep respect for the people we assist because we see them as strong, capable individuals, not as helpless victims.

In our communication, whether through my own channels or DG ECHO's campaigns, social media, or website, we always try to show real and personal stories. These stories reveal not only the hardships people face, but also their strength and how they move forward with EU support. We show people as human beings with dignity and resilience, because this is who they are.

We also follow clear rules. We never ask people to wear EU logos, for instance. Our goal is to share their stories in a real and respectful way.

Making the EU's role visible is important for transparency and accountability. European citizens make our work possible through their support and solidarity, so they deserve to see how their contributions help save lives and bring hope. That is how we build a bond of trust and keep their long-term support.

EU citizens support is very strong. According to the 2024 Eurobarometer, more than 9 out of 10 people believe that humanitarian aid is important. This shows a real European commitment to solidarity and human dignity. I am proud to carry that responsibility.

We work in partnership. We respect and empower those we help, and we make sure our actions reflect the values of the EU and its people, clearly, visibly, and with integrity.

- > 2. Given your background in journalism, how do you see the EU's role in shaping public perceptions of humanitarian crises? Should donors be more involved in encouraging nuanced and dignified humanitarian communication?**

The EU plays a central role in shaping how the public sees humanitarian crises. But we also have a communication challenge. The EU is often seen as a large and distant machine, far removed from people's everyday lives. The EU plays a crucial role in humanitarian aid, but we also need to improve how we connect with citizens more broadly. We must show clearly and simply how EU actions benefit people, making the EU more relatable and present in people's lives.

Since early 2025, we have seen major cuts in aid budgets, mainly from the US. This is devastating, as needs are going up and resources are decreasing. Yet, this challenge is also an opportunity for the EU to step up as a trusted and reliable humanitarian actor.

Our partners in the field, the people in need, and European citizens all know they can count on the EU to deliver timely assistance, while defending the full respect of international humanitarian law. This ensures aid truly reaches those who need it most.

Our humanitarian principles of humanity, independence, impartiality and neutrality, will always be our guiding light, even when they are under attack. Today international humanitarian law is routinely violated, blocking aid access and putting humanitarian workers in danger. Misleading information and harmful narratives confuse and mislead the public and undermine aid efforts.

Today more than ever, donors like the EU must lead by example and support clear, respectful, and truthful humanitarian communication that highlights both the challenges, and the resilience of people affected by crises.

**> 3. In your view, how can donors like the EU support the decolonisation of humanitarian communication? Are there policies or practices that can help elevate local voices and media, especially in crises?**

Decolonising humanitarian communication starts with humility and recognising that people affected by crises are not just subjects of our stories nor perceived as enabled victims, but rather as storytellers.

We should also recognize that those in need of humanitarian aid are often facing natural disasters driven by climate change. A challenge we all share responsibility for.

The same applies to regional instabilities, including wars and crises rooted in complex geopolitical dynamics.

As donors, we have a responsibility to not only fund humanitarian action, but to shift how that action is communicated. That means actively creating space for local voices, perspectives, and media. This is even more essential in crises zones, where narratives are often dominated by external actors.

During my missions, my approach is to step back, listen, and ensure that those living through crises are able to share their experiences in their own words. With consent, we highlight the voices of people who are often overlooked.

Supporting local media must also be part of the solution. That means building long-term partnerships that go beyond visibility and amplify local voices. Only then can humanitarian communication truly reflect the dignity and diversity of the people it serves.

**> 4. Disinformation and misinformation are increasingly shaping public perceptions of humanitarian action. How does the EU plan to support humanitarian actors in protecting the credibility and neutrality of their work in this hostile information environment? Are there initiatives under DG ECHO or the Commission more broadly to help NGOs address dis- and misinformation targeting their humanitarian work or humanitarian principles?**

Misinformation and disinformation are often used as a weapon of war in situations of conflict. This has a real effect on humanitarian efforts and the people they serve. One of my priorities is to counter these harmful narratives head on. We do this by sharing accurate and reliable information about our work in every area. Trust in our institutions and effective communication is essential, especially since citizens are asking for it.

Promoting our partners activities through EU-funded projects increases their visibility and helps to counter false narratives. Just one example: with UNHCR, we created a toolkit to protect information on digital platforms. This toolkit helps humanitarian workers spot and stop misinformation, especially about displaced and stateless people. It is used worldwide and recommended by the Commission and partners.

Talking about this problem also helps. During this year's European Humanitarian Forum, I met with humanitarian workers to explore ways to tackle these challenges. We are now planning more actions to train our staff and support others in handling misinformation.

**> 5. Public trust in institutions and media is declining in many contexts. What can humanitarian actors, with the support of the EU, do to rebuild this trust, particularly when it comes to communicating about crises that receive little or no media coverage/attention?**

We clearly see the decline in public trust, even in election results, where extreme views are gaining ground. Citizens are sending a message, and we need to listen. They want more credibility, clarity, and real results.

The EU dedicates at least 15% of its annual humanitarian budget to “forgotten crises,” such as conflicts in the Philippines, Haiti, or violence in Northwest Nigeria. We need to improve media access to these underreported areas, so journalists can witness and report on these crises.

We also need to build strong and lasting partnerships with the media to ensure accurate coverage. One challenge is “audience fatigue”, which we can counter by shifting the focus away from overwhelming statistics and towards the human stories behind the crises that people can relate to and that put a face to the suffering.

The EU has people working around the world to assist media in accessing up-to-date information and in covering neglected crises more effectively. Better access, stronger partnerships, human-centered storytelling, and informed communication are essential if we want to rebuild public trust and ensure that no crisis is left in the shadows.

**> 6. How can the EU help amplify responsible, balanced humanitarian communication in an age dominated by polarisation and sensationalism? How can NGOs support this?**

In an age marked by polarisation and sensationalism, we must remain credible, factual, principled, and consistent. That is the best way for donors like the EU to amplify responsible and balanced humanitarian communication.

Promoting a positive narrative of EU solidarity with people affected by long-standing and emerging crises helps to show the concrete impact of humanitarian aid. This narrative must be grounded in real results and shared values.

NGOs, as well as international organisations receiving EU support, have a crucial role to play. By sharing compelling human-interest stories from the field, they help bring the humanitarian response to life and make its impact more relatable and understandable to the public.

We must also make our partnerships more visible and meaningful on the ground. This includes openly communicating about who we support, how we do it, and the values that guide our work. The EU is proud to stand as a credible and reliable humanitarian actor in today’s volatile world. It is our responsibility and the message that both European citizens and the people we support deserve to hear.

4 July 2025  
Interview conducted by VOICE