



VOICE ROUND TABLE

« NGOs and the Challenges of EU Humanitarian Aid »

Date: 4 October 2005 (9h30-12h30) - Location: Médecins du Monde, 62 rue Marcadet, 75018 Paris

Notes

INTRODUCTION

The Director of VOICE Kathrin Schick presented the main objectives of the Round Table: To discuss the main concerns of the French NGOs in relation to the EU, but also, to address the issue of humanitarian aid in a much larger perspective. She expressed her gratitude in the name of VOICE to Coordination SUD, MDM and DG ECHO, for their support in organising the Round Table.

INTERVENTIONS

The Vice-President of Coordination Sud, Michel BRUGIERE, welcomed the participants. In his opinion, the French NGOs are facing four main challenges:

- Difficulties to intervene in conflict and post-conflict areas.
- The need to ensure reliability of its human resources (in particular the Heads of Missions)
- Even if a formalized exchange of information does exist between the NGOs and the French Government, the financial contribution of the Humanitarian Action Delegation (Délégation à l'action humanitaire) is relatively small (10 MEUROS per year).
- The importance of private donors, which allow NGOs to bridge the gap of the public donor's payment delays.

In conclusion, Michel Brugière observed that the French NGO situation is worrying and especially so in the context of NGO competition.

Michel ARRION, Head of Unit in the DG ECHO (ECHO 4), opened his intervention with a comment that in the EU, one is not faced with *one* humanitarian aid body but with 26 distinctive humanitarian aid bodies (put in place by the EC as well as by the members states themselves).

According to him, humanitarian aid is facing two challenges. Firstly, one related to general coordination. A humanitarian aid coordination forum does not exist at the level of the EU. Humanitarian aid issues "travel" between the Development Commission and the Foreign Affairs Commission of the European Parliament on the basis of the beneficiaries' ACP affiliation or lack of it. At the Council level there is no working group.

Finally, at UN level – in particular at the level of agency councils such are WHO, UNICEF and HCR -, the European Union does not really have a say.

The second challenge concerns the manner in which EU member states administer humanitarian aid. This supervision is handled at the Foreign Affairs Ministries, which gives bilateral aid a political character. In consequence, the grand principles of humanitarian aid (neutrality and impartiality) are not respected by the states.

For Michel Arrion, NGOs should affirm their added value in relation to other humanitarian actors, mainly the agencies of the United Nations. In the current state of affairs, they remain simple contractors of the abovementioned agencies. When facing the military or civil protection groups conducting humanitarian aid, NGOs should demonstrate their professionalism, their respect for humanitarian principles and the lower cost of their interventions. Lastly, the NGOs should get more involved in institutional debates, namely in the process of Global Appeals Procedures (CAP/Procédures d'Appel Global) of the UN.

Commissioner Louis Michel, who is at the head of ECHO, which has now become a General Direction, has to be able to handle Development Aid dossiers in a more political manner while the humanitarian aid issues have to be treated independently from the political agenda. An examination of the Constitutional Treaty of the European Union shows that a risk of politicization of humanitarian aid exists. As a matter of fact, it establishes a Minister of foreign relations charged with maintaining the coherence of the Unions' external relations including humanitarian aid. Michel Arrion concluded his intervention by underlining the importance of communication (visibility) and the necessity to display what the EU is doing in the sphere of humanitarian aid.

President of VOICE, Paul GROSSRIEDER, opened his intervention by indicating that a humanitarian network like VOICE, faced with the double challenge of dialogue and cooperation, can play a significant role in the context of the EU. However, this coordination is conditioned by the necessity of preserving a coherence of discourse when dealing with different approaches of humanitarian aid

He then exposed the environment in which VOICE develops its activities:

- There is a risk of politicization of humanitarian aid, of it being used for “leverage purposes” in European external relations (in the context of the CFSP);
- The image of humanitarian aid is being modified due to its militarization (ex. Afghanistan);
- The tackling of operational activities by ECHO cannot be expected in the near future;
- International humanitarian law is being broken, namely by the United States (in Afghanistan and Irak); here the position of the European Union is contrary to that of the US;
- The issue of visibility of the EU as a donor has to be put in perspective to that of the security of the humanitarian field workers. Whatever the visibility criteria may be, the imperative has to be that access to the victims is preserved;

- An important aspect of humanitarian action is the question of human protection, the protection of persons. Humanitarian action is not limited to simple logistics; it has to contribute to the dignity of its beneficiaries.

DEBAT

Under the presidency of Mr. Eric CHEVALLIER, professor of Political Science in Paris, the debate was structured around two main subjects (note: the interventions of the participants and orators have been grouped according to issues)

First subject: How do current transformations relating to issues of added value of NGOs, coordination and visibility affect the NGOs?

➤ NGO coordination and their involvement in major humanitarian debates:

- ✓ NGOs are facing three limits: a desinterest and lack of means to tackle big humanitarian questions, an existing political agenda which strives to limit the implication of the NGO community concerning these questions and a lack of coordination.
- ✓ Presently, NGOs act when they are capable do to so, namely via the appeals launched in specialised media (ex. The Lancet) or they indulge in common lobbying activities on thematic dossiers (ex. Chechenia).
- ✓ More coordination of NGO activities is required, particularly through networks such as VOICE.
- ✓ Even if complementarities do exist at national level, NGOs should formulate a common approach, but also exchange their respective experiences.
- ✓ The NGOs should develop communication strategies on common positions at political level (ex. in relation to members of the European Council)
- ✓ In order to do this, they should bring into play national parliaments, which can be used as relays, but equally so the (French) members of the European Parliament, who are rarely solicited by the NGOs. The European Commission, together with its procedures, should be questioned. The creation of a sub-commission on humanitarian aid in the European Parliament could favour this particular relay.
- ✓ Together with its members VOICE is currently working on three subjects that complement each other: The European Voluntary Corps (and the question of human resources in general), the Framework Partnership Agreement with ECHO (remark: in relation to this question VOICE calls upon NGOs to work more with other services of the Commission other than ECHO, such as DG Budget), and the question of the added value of NGO activities (through a joint Tsunami action with CONCORD).

- The role of NGOs in the humanitarian debate in other EU countries (commentaries of VOICE SCHA members present at the Round Table):
 - ✓ German NGOs collaborate in a more comprehensive manner with local partners. The quality of humanitarian aid must be evaluated by taking into account both quantitative and qualitative criteria. Considering purely quantitative criteria is not enough. Qualitative criteria include, among other aspects, respect of humanitarian principles and the impact of humanitarian action on the local situation.
 - ✓ In Ireland, the French NGOs are perceived as “militant”, namely on the subject of humanitarian principles. There is little coordination between Irish NGOs. In some cases it is probably easier to set up coordination at European level than at national level.
 - ✓ There are no British NGO coalitions as such. Furthermore, they tend to take fewer risks than their French counterparts. They do implement however in substantial research. Although some government policies are influenced by NGO research projects, the projects recommendations are not exploited to their just value. This should be possible without endangering NGOs fieldwork.
- Commentaries of ECHO (M. Arrion):
 - ✓ Addressing the question of politicization of ECHO: NGOs should try not to exercise pressure on ECHO’s actions (ex. Saharawi situation).
 - ✓ European Voluntary Corps: Certain European parliamentarians are pushing this idea forward. However, DG ECHO is not favourable to this idea because there are enough humanitarian actors on the ground. Furthermore, security considerations have to be considered seriously. Three voluntary programmes exist already (that of the Red Cross, the UN and of the NGOs themselves);
 - ✓ Operational capacities of DG ECHO: DG ECHO currently has six regional offices. It is planning to increase the number of its field experts from 70 to 100. They will be trained in humanitarian assessment analysis. Nevertheless, this training will not undermine the existing analysis methods put in place by UN or ICRC.

Second subject: What are the relations between NGOs and the EU (partnership with DG ECHO)?

- ✓ Certain NGOs including the VOICE network consider that the partnership with ECHO is starting to show signs of polarisation. The Framework Partnership Agreement is becoming hard to apply. The OLAF who is currently investigating on 32 humanitarian NGOs is also exerting pressure on the NGOs.
- ✓ Michel Arrion reminded that DGO ECHO is a partner who has proven that it is open for dialogue. It has managed to negotiate a series of derogations to the Financial Regulation beneficial to the overall humanitarian action by invoking the argument of emergency.
- ✓ He also confirmed that the controlling bodies of the EC have intensified their control activities also on DG ECHO which has direct repercussions on the partner NGOs. He

announced that a verification of purchase prices practised by the NGO is next on the agenda.

- ✓ A lot of frustrations resulted from the final liquidation of the projects signed under the previous framework agreement. For the moment and in the future, the personnel of ECHO will strive to work with the partner NGOs in the most transparent and comprehensive way possible.
- ✓ Finally, through the « Grant Facility » ECHO supports the activities related to the quality of humanitarian aid.

CONCLUSIVE STATEMENTS

Michel ARRION concluded with the following remarks:

- ✓ DG ECHO has embarked on an annual evaluation of each of its partners on the basis of their project activities effectuated in 2004. This evaluation will be based on performances of administrative, operational and financial kind. ECHO finances 50 NGOs while DG ECHO has some 180 partner NGOs. Eventually, DG ECHO could ask the NGOs who are unsuccessful in obtaining funds to leave the partnership.
- ✓ In relation to the Financial Perspectives 2007 – 2013: In the case that the EU would be forced to base its decisions on the lowest common denominator, it is probable that the Community budget would be established at the expense of Chapter 4 (i.e. external aid: development and humanitarian aid)
- ✓ Lastly, although the new member states do not demonstrate a very strong “community “ spirit, a new civil society is starting to develop.

Paul GROSSRIEDER remarked that the quality of the exchanges witnessed during the Round Table proves that VOICES’ Board should “visit” different countries in order to meet members of its network in a more direct manner.

For **Michel BRUGIERE**, The « humanitarian” working group of Coordination Sud should become more active.

(In house translation from French by the secretariat)

GvM/KS
20/10/2005

Annex: List of Participants



Avec le soutien financier de la Commission européenne par l'intermédiaire de son service d'aide humanitaire: