

Interview with Andreas Papaconstantinou

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VIEWS ON THE EU



As the humanitarian arm of the European Union, DG ECHO has mobilized substantial funding: 950 million euros for humanitarian food assistance and it will continue to do so as necessary in the near future. A key point is that while we have increased the level of funding to Ukraine due to the very critical humanitarian crisis, both Commissioner Lenarčič and DG ECHO have voiced in very strong terms that other crises in the world remain priorities for us, and they have not been forgotten at the expense of Ukraine. The EU will continue monitoring the food situation worldwide in all the vulnerable hotspots.

In the longer term, we want to continue working closely with the development and peace actors, under what we call the Nexus approach to help build more resilient food systems. Overall, we aim to provide humanitarian food assistance in more efficient ways and promote further anticipatory actions.

- **1. According to the recent Global Hunger Index, 44 countries have alarming or serious levels of hunger. What are the EU's priorities to address the growing humanitarian needs, especially regarding the rising hunger levels?**

The issue of hunger is very high on our agenda, and even more today considering the very dire humanitarian situation in Ukraine and its global impact. According to recent figures, specifically the "Hunger Hotspots" analysis from September of this year, there are currently over 220 million people in need of food assistance, which represents a 14% increase over the course of only nine months.

In the short term, the European Union (EU) is working on different fronts to target the countries most in need. We have deployed the EU "Solidarity Lanes" initiative, allowing Ukraine to export over 15 million tonnes of grain through alternative routes, and, as recently announced by the EU Commission President Mrs. von der Leyen, the EU is supporting financially the "Grain from Ukraine" initiative by the World Food Programme. Moreover, the Commission works closely with the EU Member States in the "Team Europe" approach with our Global Food Security Response. This initiative has so far reached 8 billion euros from the EU budget, covering the period from 2021 to 2024.

- **2. Conflict is one of the biggest drivers of food insecurity. How could the EU and the wider international community address this root cause?**

The EU can only address the root causes of food insecurity by bringing in other key actors, not only the European Union, its Member States and other like-minded states, but also the development and peace actors since they are essential. Within the European Union, we have been successful in joining forces with like-minded actors by using conflict advocacy and diplomacy.

In Yemen, for example, the European Union and its Member States have successfully advocated for increased access, improving the working conditions for the humanitarian workers. This has been done in tandem with the international humanitarian community. In that same conflict we have given strong support, and continue to do so, to the UN Special Envoy for Yemen, Ambassador Hans Grundberg, to promote the peace talks, ensure respect for international humanitarian law, and secure access to humanitarian actors.

A key premise of our approach is that we should not aggravate or induce conflicts, according to the "do no harm" principle, we should bind all international actors to monitor intended and unintended impacts and avoid contributing to instability and violence.

- **3. The humanitarian-development-peace nexus is often seen as one of the key approaches in the fight against hunger. What is your perspective on this? How does the EU apply concretely this joint approach to prevent but also address the consequences of hunger?**

The humanitarian-development-peace nexus is absolutely essential. As we continue to provide short-term humanitarian assistance, we must also address, in a longer-term perspective, the key drivers of food insecurity. These drivers are conflict, economic shocks, and - very importantly - climate change, as well as the underlying factors of inequality in the world and poverty. This approach should be done in close coordination with the development and peace actors to support the development of resilient food systems.

Over the last few months, ECHO has rolled out several initiatives to advance the nexus approach in very concrete ways. There was a high-level meeting on the food and nutrition crisis in the Sahel, and Lake Chad, which we co-organised with the Sahel and West Africa Club and the Global Network Against Food Crisis, to tackle the food and nutrition crisis in that region. This event brought together humanitarian and development actors around the problem of hunger in the Sahel. The aim of the event was not only to raise funds but to agree on a roadmap toward an integrated approach against hunger. This approach would bring together short-term humanitarian responses with longer-term actions to promote resilient food systems. We did a similar event in the Horn of Africa and we aim to have similar initiatives in other countries too.

We want to bring the nexus to an even larger scale through our Team Europe approach. One example is the Global Food Crisis Response, agreed in June, where the European Commission and the EU Member States work with the countries affected by the food crisis. It is a huge undertaking, but the political drive is very clear. The nexus approach works if it is very concrete, from the outset of a crisis and throughout the various phases. This approach needs clear guidance from the political level, which is what the EU has been ensuring. Even recently, new guidelines have been issued, showing that there is a clear political direction to make this approach operational and bring all the actors together in specific contexts where a difference can be made.

- **4. The lack of access to humanitarian aid is yet another key issue of great concern when food aid cannot reach the most affected communities. Which role can the EU play in enabling the delivery of aid from their partners to those most in need?**

The lack of access is a key concern in many conflict zones, such as in Nigeria, Somalia, Ethiopia and Yemen. At EU level, we are using all the tools at our disposal to overcome this challenge. In September, Commissioner Lenarčič made a strong statement calling for committed humanitarian access in Northern Ethiopia and condemning the International Humanitarian Law violations. This happened after the resumption of hostilities in August, with reports of thousands of people displaced and widespread damage to civilian property and infrastructure, amid drought and grave food insecurity.

On the front of Yemen, the EU together with Sweden, through the senior official meeting process, is facilitating coordinated advocacy among the international humanitarian community. This has enabled us to maintain a unified position, which is essential in sustaining principled negotiations over time. While the context remains very challenging and more needs to be done, our advocacy in Yemen has contributed to increasing access and improving working conditions for humanitarians.

- **5. Anticipatory approaches and preparedness are key in preventing famine. How does the EU promote the most effective approaches? How are these approaches operationalised?**

The EU is committed to stepping up its approach to anticipatory action and preparedness. However, Anticipatory action is not a priority for the EU alone. This approach features prominently on the current international agenda against the food crisis. The UN and the G7 have been very actively promoting anticipatory action over the last few years. It was one of the five action lines in the G7 "famine and humanitarian crisis compact" adopted last year. The German G7 presidency has made it now one of its main priorities.

Our aim through the anticipatory action approach is to help respond to needs and to support building the resilience to shocks of local communities, climate shocks, based on reliable early warning systems, that should be integrated within the national social protection systems.

Over the last few years, we have conducted several projects with a clear focus on food security. In Burundi, we are working with the World Food Programme to set up an anticipatory action scheme that can be activated ahead of climate shocks, such as floods or droughts. We are transferring capacities to the Burundi Red Cross so that the scheme can be run locally. DG ECHO is also closely working with the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) to establish anticipatory action in a number of countries worldwide.

➤ 6. Bridging the funding gap is key to reducing suffering and supporting the raising number of people in need. Considering the limited humanitarian budget line just approved for 2023 (1.8 bln euros), how does DG ECHO plan to address the global food insecurity worldwide efficiently and effectively on top of all other commitments for life-saving aid?

The funding gap is of great concern to me. According to UN OCHA, humanitarian appeals are covered at less than 50%, as we speak. Part of the problem is that humanitarian assistance depends too much on a very limited number of donors. The 10 top donors, provide around 90% of the humanitarian assistance in total. And this includes us, the European Union. While we are making efforts to increase our support further in a challenging budgetary situation, it is crucial that other donors step up their efforts as well. The EU alone cannot solve this issue.

Bridging the funding gap is a problem and while food assistance needs have doubled over the last six years, food assistance has unfortunately stagnated at the global level. Though ECHO funding has increased, the needs have significantly increased as well and the global trend is that the overall funding is not going up.

To address this worrying trend, we need funding to become more efficient, we need to further coordinate with other key donors, and change the architecture of the donorship worldwide with more actors stepping in. Non-traditional donors need to be mobilised and this is a key challenge. We need to work with other financial actors on what we call innovative finance and create more synergies with civil protection and in-kind assistance.

The challenge is enormous, and we need to work very hard toward the resolution of this issue.

➤ 7. Regarding the importance of enlarging the donor base, what are your expectations for the next European Humanitarian Forum?

We are still finalising the program with our Swedish colleagues and one of the issues that my leadership wants to bring to the forum is the funding gap. We want to send a very powerful message to the world that we need to step up our efforts, even in this very difficult context where we're in. It is one of the biggest issues that we are facing in the humanitarian world.

Interview conducted by Roberta Fadda and Francesca Giubilo on 9 December 2022.