



**Conflict and EU humanitarian aid:
The EU Comprehensive Approach -What does 'In but out' really mean?
VOICE event report (Brussels, 11 May 2015)**

Summary:

This event, gathering 88 people, discussed how the European Commission's Department for Humanitarian Aid and Civil Protection (DG ECHO) is 'In but Out' of the EU's Comprehensive Approach to Conflict and External Crises. The EU has flexibility to mobilise different foreign policy responses to crises which can be an asset in understanding the drivers of conflict. A large proportion of the EU's humanitarian assistance is to man-made crises where political solutions would be needed. However, joint public press and media work by the foreign policy and humanitarian departments, presents both challenges and opportunities, including for the perception of the EU and humanitarians in the field. The need for humanitarians to be better heard within the foreign policy discussions in Council was discussed, as well as the need for EU member states to join ECHO in driving a principled and needs based approach to humanitarian action.

VOICE President, Nicolas Borsinger introduced VOICE's past engagement with the EU Comprehensive Approach, and the relevance and timeliness of a discussion on this in the context of the increasing complexity of humanitarian crises particularly in conflict areas. **Cristina Churruga, Director of NOHA Deusto** gave a brief overview of the current EU Aid Architecture and the new working methods of the European Commission since taking office in 2014 and their relevance to the implementation of the Comprehensive Approach. She said that the policy, providing opportunities for improved and complementary EU and Member State action on the ground in conflict areas was positive, while also highlighting the risks it can present in terms of the potential to instrumentalise EU humanitarian aid and compromise humanitarian principles - asking the panel members to share their experience and views on these issues.

Max Lamesch, Luxembourg COHAFA representative and COHAFA Chair July-December 2015 from the Luxembourg Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs - after an introduction of the work of COHAFA - reminded participants of the increasing direct attacks on humanitarian workers and shrinking humanitarian space. Both phenomena are linked to humanitarian aid becoming increasingly subordinated to political prerogatives. To reverse this negative trend, he expressed the commitment of the Luxembourg EU Presidency in 2015 to find ways to pursue a principled approach to humanitarian aid, including by advocating for it as a foreign policy instrument with its own mandate, objectives and priorities, preferably discussed in a more regular way, including at high-level ministerial meetings during the upcoming EU presidency.

Jean-Louis De Brouwer, Director of Humanitarian and Civil Protection Operations of DG ECHO at the European Commission, citing Art. 214. §1&2 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU on humanitarian aid that '*...shall be conducted within the framework of the principles and objectives of the external action of the Union*' - stated that the Comprehensive Approach is in complete accordance with the EU treaties, and the reality is that the EU's humanitarian aid is carried out within the framework of the

EU external action policy. He pointed out that the European Union is a regional organisation with its own political agenda, but acknowledged that there can always be risks of blurring different institutions' mandates. He pointed out that a more cohesive and comprehensive working methodology has already existed amongst different Commission Departments, such as in the coordination between DEVCO and ECHO in terms of building resilience. He also drew attention to the recent press work by Ms. Mogherini and Mr. Stylianides on South-Sudan, where political rivalry triggering humanitarian consequences needs to be addressed in a comprehensive way. In conclusion, he underlined the importance for ECHO of participating in the mutual exchange between EU institutions to understand each others' mandates and for humanitarians to engage in *decision-shaping*.

Sara Tesorieri, Humanitarian and Conflict Policy Advisor at **Oxfam EU** Office shared her opinion on the benefits for humanitarians of the Comprehensive Approach, such as in better addressing prevention and recovery phases of humanitarian crises and better analysis of the drivers of the conflict. She also praised that humanitarian considerations had been well reflected in the Comprehensive Approach policy itself. She raised some concerns about how few foreign policy actors understand the nature of humanitarian aid, leading thus to unintentional blurring of the lines between humanitarian action and other policies. This can be reinforced by inadequate communication about different policies and aid modalities, which undermines the integrity of principled humanitarian action.

During the second part of the panel discussion on the interpretation of the EU Comprehensive Approach at member states', ECHO and NGO level, Mr. Lamesch re-emphasized that while member states, from a humanitarian perspective, have a clear position on a principled-driven agenda, this is not necessarily feeding in well to the broader foreign policy discussions and public communication in Council and the EEAS. Reinforcing the promotion of humanitarian principles and International Humanitarian Law, and engaging in principled-based crisis analysis and dialogue is still relevant.

Mr. De Brouwer described further how ECHO is part of the agenda (not an instrument!) of EU foreign policy as well as the importance of being involved in conflict analysis and strategy planning, citing humanitarian crises where political solutions are indispensable. At the same time, referring to the worsened access to Syria after the issue of the UN Security Council resolution on humanitarian access in 2014, he also recognised that political involvement in crisis management can result in shrinking humanitarian space.

Finally, Ms. Tesorieri said that it seemed that few EU member states were really willing to engage in humanitarian policy, leaving ECHO to drive the agenda of principled humanitarian aid rather than it being seen as a collective responsibility. She added that the EU should ensure flexibility in its responses to crises, since the reality on the ground is different from one country to the other, the methods of assistance and the policy should be guided by what serves the needs of affected people best. Sometimes this means supporting them with one of ECHO's tools, e.g. humanitarian assistance or the civil protection mechanisms, but at other times, such as currently in Yemen, it can involve concerted diplomacy and advocacy in relation, for example, to trade restrictions.

The discussion moved onto how the EU's aid architecture can support humanitarian actors in the field. Mr. Lamesch underlined that the EU's aid architecture should support the UN's central coordination role in humanitarian action. As a small member state with limited field presence, Luxembourg is quite dependent on information and mechanisms associated with the UN. Mr. De Brouwer agreed, acknowledging that occasionally the EU

had undertaken coordination activities (previously in Ukraine which is already taken over by the UN and in Myanmar, where it is still ongoing). There is a need for better coordination and complementarity between the EU and UN structures. Ms. Tesorieri recognised that ECHO staff effectively and seriously promotes humanitarian principles with all relevant actors in the field. The role of ECHO in the field in bridging between the operational partners of ECHO and the EU delegations, could usefully be expanded. There have been positive examples such as in relation to the cluster system in Iraq - where ECHO effectively used its 'In but Out' approach to the politics related to disputed territories and mandates.

During the Q&A sessions, concerns were raised around the public- and media-interpretation of the Comprehensive Approach as EU's strategy to counter terrorism in Syria and Iraq, and worries were expressed about the EEAS' influence on ECHO's decision making process. In his response, Mr. De Brouwer focused on good examples of EU communication in terms of defending humanitarian principles, and differentiating them from political choices. Ms. Tesorieri questioned if public communication really is a major influence on the perception of the EU and humanitarian actors in the field.

Referring to the Joint Communication on the Syria and Iraq Strategy where COHAFA's input was not sufficiently taken into consideration, Mr. Lamesch expressed his hope that COHAFA could increase its influence on EU policy making, and reiterated the Luxembourg Presidency's commitment towards awareness-raising on humanitarian aid within the Council and in outside communication.

For a follow-up question on security issues stemming from the misperception of humanitarian aid, Mr. De Brouwer restated the relevance of ECHO in the EU's foreign policy agenda and reminded that 80% of its budget is allocated to man-made crises, needing political solutions. Taking the example of providing humanitarian aid in Northern-Cameroon, this relief intervention is not sufficient to eliminate the violence inflicted by Boko Haram. However understanding the operational realities, humanitarian assistance is still crucial, in this case in helping meet protection needs.

He also reaffirmed ECHO's continued presence in forgotten crises and in situations lacking any signs of political resolution. He envisaged the EU as a global donor with expanding capacities worldwide, and suggested finding new ways for bridging the gap between increasing needs and limited financial resources.

In addressing perception-induced security concerns, Mr. Lamesch warned against too much inter-institutional coordination and joint communication which risk to subordinate humanitarian aid to political prerogatives. However he acknowledged the need for the Comprehensive Approach and institutional dialogue.

VOICE (*Voluntary Organisations in Cooperation in Emergencies*) is a network representing 84 European NGOs active in humanitarian aid worldwide. VOICE is the main NGO interlocutor with the European Union on emergency aid and disaster risk reduction and it promotes the values of humanitarian NGOs.



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