



VOICE 1992-2012 (extract from VOICE out loud 15)

This year VOICE is 25 years old and so is DG ECHO (perhaps the names are not insignificant?). We have come a long way since then....

1992 - 1997 The early years under Director Xavier Ortegat

The Humanitarian Office of the European Commission was created in 1992 under Gomez Reino. 7 NGO members of CLONGⁱ created VOICE as a relatively autonomous structure working on humanitarian matters inside the platform. NGOs asked ECHO for a special relationship based on partnership. “Partnership” would involve the shaping of policies, capacity building towards professionalization, and would show two parties working with different roles but towards the same purpose.

However, the start was not easy; the Commission had little or no experience with civil society, so there was distrust to be overcome on both sides. The first “Partnership Framework Agreement” (PFA) entered into force in 1993. It was written to standardise and clarify EU humanitarian decision making. In these early years, VOICE and other ECHO partners in the so-called “Dialogue Group” were disappointed that ECHO extended the “PFA” several times without consultation of NGOs - over time, its name changed to FPA (Framework Partnership Agreement). They also complained that the PFA did not reflect humanitarian principles. This was partially remedied by the EU Regulation on Humanitarian Aid of 1996, which included some NGO contributions.

Over a period of 4 years, VOICE membership grew to 74 members from all over Europe. Coordination was already an issue at that time, and during the Rwanda crisis VOICE collected information on over 1300 projects which it presented to the UN donor conference in The Hague. Attracting ECHO funding for members and developing common activities with ECHO became other important priorities; in 1996 a high-level forum jointly organised by VOICE and ECHO in Ireland discussed the ethics of humanitarian aid. Also several high-visibility emergencies (e.g. Somalia), the role of the military and Linking Relief, Rehabilitation and Development (LRRD) received a lot of attention. Discussions around cooperation among development and humanitarian NGOs resulted in VOICE becoming formalised as a department within CLONG.

1998 - 2001 Growing further under Director Gianni Rufini

Building on the previous achievements, this period saw an increase in the external visibility of the network and engagement from members through a number of ECHO financed projects, policy papers and activities related to the humanitarian situation in various countries.

When the second FPA began in January 1999, VOICE created the FPA Watch Group to engage in the FPA renegotiation. This group was a response to the coordination concerns of ECHO partners and ECHO’s request to have a single interlocutor. A number of other working groups were established, including one

on security which led to the launch of the Humanitarian Security and Protection Network database.

VOICE also set up an NGO focal point in Tirana in 1999 to facilitate NGO response to the influx of Kosovar refugees into Albania, with the objective of collecting and disseminating information regarding humanitarian activities. This was followed by the regular 'Focus' publication, which aimed to inform European decision-makers about the Balkans. Another publication was the leading European Quarterly "Humanitarian Affairs Review" published together with Forum Europe. A successful photo exhibition on the issue of child soldiers toured European capitals.

2001 - today, Director Kathrin Schick

As CLONG underwent a transformation in 2000, VOICE members decided that it was time to establish an independent network of humanitarian NGOs. The transition phase was challenging, but programme activities continued. VOICE continued to work on LRRD, remained engaged with the Sphere Project, followed the theme of child soldiers with an expert conference, facilitated the FPA Watch group and established a solid working relationship with DG ECHO. Over the last years, priority has been given to the importance of humanitarian principles for operational humanitarian NGOs, triggered by the humanitarian situations in Afghanistan and Palestine and an emerging EU focus on crisis management. A milestone was the engagement of VOICE members in the process which led to the signing of the European Consensus on Humanitarian Aid by the European institutions and member states in 2007. To strengthen common positioning further, members established a working group on Disaster Risk Reduction in 2008 and one on civil-military relations in 2009. The expertise of these groups and their policy and advocacy work has been widely recognised.

The network is now well established as a credible interlocutor for EU institutions and EU policy makers alike on matters of humanitarian aid, representing 85 European NGOs active in humanitarian aid worldwideⁱⁱ.

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- *May 2012*

ⁱ CLONG stands for 'Comité de liaison des ONG de développement auprès l'Union européenne'. CLONG was the umbrella platform for European Development NGOs. In 2003 CLONG became CONCORD.

ⁱⁱ This article is based upon several documents, including the activity report 1998-2001 and VOICE Briefing paper "Partners in Humanitarian Aid - The FPA consultation as a model of EC partnership with NGOs". More details on achievements and activities over the last decade can be found on www.ngovoice.org