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VOICE OUT LOUD

#39

THE CHALLENGE OF HUMANITARIAN COMMUNICATION

BRIDGING PRINCIPLES AND PUBLIC PERCEPTION

VOICE
European humanitarian NGOs.
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VOICE OUT LOUD #39

THE CHALLENGE OF HUMANITARIAN COMMUNICATION - BRIDGING PRINCIPLES AND PUBLIC PERCEPTION

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VOICE wishes to thank the contributors of this issue.

Editorial

In a world saturated with images and headlines, the stories we, humanitarian NGOs, tell (and how we tell them) makes a difference. Humanitarian organisations have long relied on storytelling to mobilise solidarity and action, but in today's complex, interconnected, and unequal landscape, we have to go further: to question not only what stories we tell, but who owns them, and what power dynamics they reinforce or disrupt.

This edition of VOICE out loud brings together powerful contributions from across our network, all centred on a critical reflection: **how can we ensure that humanitarian narratives promote dignity, agency, and justice?**

From the ethics of visual storytelling to deeper questions around representation, ownership, and decolonisation, our contributors challenge us to rethink assumptions and practices. In doing so, they highlight how shifting narratives is inseparable from shifting power — including who sets priorities, who receives funding, and whose voices are heard at the decision-making table.

ADRA sheds light on the ethics of visual storytelling in humanitarian fundraising, urging organisations to move beyond performative images and ensure consent, context, and dignity in how individuals and communities are portrayed.

HIAS Europe emphasizes the need to rethink humanitarian narratives through a "story-owning" approach, advocating for more equitable representation and challenging the structural imbalances that shape whose voices are heard — and whose are not.

Geneva Call shows how misinformation and disinformation can endanger humanitarian access and civilian safety in conflict zones. Drawing on their work with armed groups, they highlight how field-based advocacy through trusted local networks helps counter rumours, safeguard humanitarian space, and strengthen compliance with international humanitarian norms.

We also share key highlights from the **VOICE event on decolonisation** which explored how colonial legacies continue to shape humanitarian systems today. The panel discussed the need to shift power and decision-making toward local communities, challenge Eurocentric narratives, and promote equitable, community-led partnerships. The aim was to spark debate and outline concrete steps for transforming humanitarian action into a more just, inclusive, and locally driven system.

In the "A Closer look section" **Médicos del Mundo** draws attention to the protracted crisis facing the Sahrawi people, where exile and marginalisation continue to undermine access to health and dignity. Their article underscores the need for consistent engagement in neglected crises and the obligation to uphold rights — regardless of geopolitical visibility.

Finally, VOICE had the privilege to interview **EU Commissioner Hadja Lahbib**. Commissioner Lahbib stresses that EU humanitarian communication must balance visibility with dignity, amplifying local voices and countering disinformation while upholding humanitarian principles. She highlights the need for responsible storytelling, stronger partnerships with NGOs and media, and credible narratives of EU solidarity to rebuild public trust and ensure no crisis is forgotten.

As VOICE, we believe that principled humanitarian action must be rooted in accountability — not only to donors or policymakers, but above all to the communities we serve.

Civil society organisations and NGO networks have a vital role to play in challenging harmful narratives and leave space open for diverse, locally led voices. But this cannot be done in isolation. Donors and policymakers must enable and encourage communication practices that move beyond visibility metrics and fundraising imperatives, creating an environment where dignity and justice are at the centre of humanitarian storytelling.

Narratives are not neutral. They are shaped by, and contribute to shape, perceptions, policies, and the allocation of resources. Telling stories ethically, shifting power meaningfully, and ensuring dignity for all are not optional ambitions — they are humanitarian imperatives. In these times of uncertainty and increased competition for attention and funding, it is our collective responsibility — NGOs, networks, and donors alike — to ensure that principled humanitarian action and the narratives that surround it respect agency and embody transparency, accountability, and solidarity.

Pauline Chetcuti
VOICE President

MORE THAN A PICTURE:
NAVIGATING THE ETHICS OF VISUAL STORYTELLING IN HUMANITARIAN FUNDRAISING

THE ISSUE

THE CHALLENGE OF HUMANITARIAN COMMUNICATION - BRIDGING PRINCIPLES AND PUBLIC PERCEPTION

THE POWER OF THE IMAGE — AND THE RESPONSIBILITY BEHIND IT

There is the saying "A picture is worth a thousand words." And indeed, images are powerful. Images possess a profound influence on the way we see and understand the world around us. Images can shape public perception, mobilizing support, and – to direct the view towards humanitarian aid – driving fundraising efforts within the humanitarian sector. The core dilemma lies in crafting compelling visual narratives that inspire action without perpetuating stereotypes and clichés, stripping dignity, or compromising our fundamental principles.

This article reflects ADRA's ongoing commitment to strengthening ethical standards in visual storytelling across its network. It shares reflections, tensions, lessons learned, and current practices with transparency and a spirit of sector-wide dialogue. This is an honest account of our present state, future aspirations, and the significance of this journey. Progress begins with the right question, not with the perfect answer.

IDENTIFYING THE PROBLEM OF TYPICAL IMAGE USAGE IN THE MEDIA

The typical cliché of hunger in the media is characterized by highly simplified, emotionalizing and often stereotypical depictions. These clichés are reproduced again and again through certain image motifs and narrative patterns and thus characterize the public perception of hunger.

Typical clichés in the media portrayal of hunger:

- Hunger is often portrayed as a distant, foreign problem that occurs in so-called 'developing countries', particularly in Africa. Typical are images of apathetic-looking, malnourished infants or young children with bloated bellies, often with flies on their faces, who appear passive and helpless.
- The images usually focus on children, as they are seen as particularly vulnerable and helpless, which they are by fact. But the images emotionalize the problem and thereby also reduce it to a specific group, while other people affected - such as adults or elderly people - are barely visible.
- In other typical images, starving people are often shown as an anonymous mass or group, rarely as individuals with their own story or voice. As a result, the depiction remains depersonalized and abstract.
- Other images show starving people in dusty, barren landscapes or in front of makeshift dwellings and thereby depicting a stereotype again.
- In general, the images are usually chosen in such a way that they serve the cliché of "misery in the distance" and stage hunger as a state of emergency, not as a structural, every day and persistent problem.
- The causes of hunger are rarely presented in a differentiated way. Instead, images of disasters, wars or natural events dominate as triggers, while structural, political, environmental, climate or economic backgrounds are usually ignored.
- Reporting often only takes place on spectacular events such as famines, natural disasters, or wars. Long-term, less visible forms of hunger and malnutrition such as "hidden hunger" are hardly ever addressed.
- Finally, the solution to the problem of hunger is often either misrepresented or ignored. Solutions such as climate-smart agriculture are rarely seen. Positive or nuanced portrayals - of people helping themselves, for example, or of successful aid projects - are rare. Instead, images of suffering and passivity dominate, following the old and outdated news rule that "bad news is good news".

By using these clichés in images, the media are transporting a wrong core message. These stereotypical depictions narrow the view of the problem of hunger and ignore complex interrelationships. They can lead to hunger being perceived as the "natural" or "unavoidable" fate of certain regions, rather than as a consequence of political, economic and social structures. And rather than a problem, that can be solved.

Focusing on these stereotypical emotional shock images is intended to generate attention and donations in the short term. But in the long term, it can also lead to numbness and indifference and "disaster fatigue." People are oversaturated with these images and stories and do not even look at them anymore.

> "Progress begins with the right question, not with the perfect answer ."

RISKS OF INSENSITIVE COMMUNICATION

Unethical image use carries significant risks. Children could be targeted by abusers, and individuals sharing their stories might face reputational damage or community retribution. Organizations risk damage to their brand if insensitive materials are published.

CULTURAL SENSITIVITY AND UNCONSCIOUS BIAS

Concepts like 'dignity' and 'empowerment' vary across cultures. Unconscious biases significantly impact decision-making, making them challenging to address. Ethical storytelling requires cultural sensitivity and reflection on personal assumptions.

THE CONSTRUCTIVE, SOLUTION-BASED APPROACH

The way out of this cliché dilemma for the media is constructive journalism. This approach was originally developed by Ulrik Haagerup, founder and CEO of Constructive Institute in Aalborg, Denmark. Constructive journalism, also known as solution-based journalism, is an approach that goes beyond mere problem reporting and specifically looks for solutions, positive examples, and opportunities for action. The aim is not only to highlight grievances, but also to present ways and initiatives that can contribute to overcoming social and other challenges. Constructive journalism aims to inform, inspire and encourage the audience to get involved by reporting in a differentiated, fact-based, and future-orientated way.

"Constructive" and "solution based" can quite rightly be viewed as the core of the work of humanitarian NGOs such as ADRA and others. This enables us as NGOs to provide media with content for this journalistic approach, from facts and information to the all-important "right" and "good" images. **The stories we can tell, from emergency aid in disasters to development cooperation, are inherently constructive and solution based.**

AN ONGOING CONVERSATION WITHIN ADRA

The foundation for this are ethical standards. ADRA, as a global network, is actively developing shared ethical standards for communications, including visual content. The network's diversity presents challenges in aligning practices across offices and contexts. While some national offices have established robust internal guidelines, others are still developing their capabilities.

WHERE WE BEGIN: THE PRINCIPLES THAT GUIDE US

ADRA's communications approach is guided by the Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS) commitments: **participation, respect, dignity,** and **accountability**. These principles inform our communications approach but can sometimes clash with practical communication needs. Real dilemmas arise, such as balancing urgency with consent, visibility with privacy, and impact with integrity.

ADRA's values "connected", "courageous", "compassionate" guide practical actions. This includes engaging local partners, ensuring informed consent, and recognizing the courage of contributors in sharing their stories.

LEARNING IN REAL TIME: REFLECTIONS FROM THE FIELD

Different ADRA offices have navigated ethical questions in campaigns and storytelling, experiencing both successes and learning opportunities. Complex decisions include choosing not to publish a powerful image, questioning a subject's portrayal, and involving local teams or subjects in decision-making. Internal questioning has been invaluable in shaping a more thoughtful approach.

FUNDRAISING PRESSURES AND AUDIENCE EXPECTATIONS

Emotional images raise more money, but at what cost? ADRA aims to engage donors with narratives based

on empowerment rather than pity. If questioned, we educate audiences, including donors, about why some images are no longer used and what a more ethical approach entails.

ADRA HAS DEVELOPED A SET OF STANDARDS AS "ADRA PROTECTION POLICY"

The ADRA Protection Policy sets out clear and binding standards for the use of images and photos in communications, in particular for the protection of children, women, and other vulnerable groups. The most important principles and guidelines can be summarized as follows:

- **Dignity and respect:** Photos and images of beneficiaries must respect their dignity and rights. The depiction must never be degrading, embarrassing, or stigmatizing. People should not be shown as victims, but as individuals with autonomy and dignity.
- **Protection against abuse:** The policy expressly prohibits any form of depiction that could put children or other vulnerable people in a potentially exploitative, dangerous, or abusive situation. This also includes the use of images that could be misused for sexual or other exploitative purposes.
- **Consent:** The informed consent of the persons depicted must be obtained before photos are taken and published. In the case of children, the consent of their legal guardians is required. The policy emphasizes that consent must be given voluntarily and without pressure.
- **Confidentiality and data protection:** Personal data and identifying characteristics of particularly vulnerable persons may not be published without express consent. This applies in particular to children, survivors of violence or other vulnerable groups.
- **Context and sensitivity:** The selection and use of images must respect cultural, social, and religious contexts. Images must not be taken out of context or used in a way that creates false impressions or reinforces stereotypes.
- **Avoidance of stereotypes:** The policy demands that images must not contribute to the reproduction of clichés or prejudices. The diversity and independence of people should be made visible.

ADRA's Protection Policy and Accountability Report guide the actions, detailing values such as protection, equal treatment, empowerment, transparency, and integrity. **ADRA is committed to international standards like CHS. The ADRA Accountability Report 2019 makes it clear that the use of images and photos in communication is characterized by clear ethical principles. ADRA is committed to upholding the dignity and protection of all people depicted and attaches particular importance to transparency, accountability, and inclusion. The portrayal of people should always be respectful, non-discriminatory, and sensitive. The standing rule for ADRA is: None of the people portrayed are to be instrumentalized for the purpose of increasing donations.** We want to provide truthful information about our projects and therefore use our own images from the project areas - even if these are sometimes not of perfect quality - instead of using purchased images.

This is based on binding guidelines such as the Protection Policy and other policies on equality and inclusion, which explicitly regulate the protection of children and vulnerable groups. There are also mechanisms for submitting complaints about inappropriate portrayals. Overall, the responsible and respectful use of visual material is a vital component of ADRA's communication and an expression of its comprehensive accountability to all stakeholders.

CONCLUSION: DOING BETTER TOGETHER

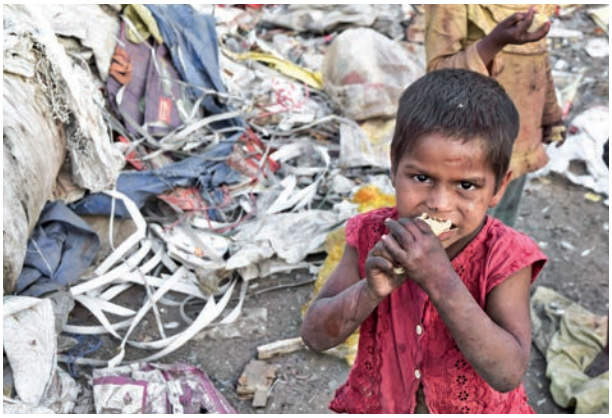
Ethical visual storytelling is about commitment, critical thinking, and a willingness to learn. ADRA approaches this work with humility, recognizing that we do not have all the answers. But as a learning organization, we are constantly developing our standards and guidelines based on experience both within our own organization and in exchange with partner organizations. We invite ongoing discussions with peers in the sector.

TENSIONS WE NAVIGATE IN VISUAL COMMUNICATIONS

- Urgency versus Consent
- Visibility versus Privacy
- Impact versus Integrity
- Fundraising needs versus Ethical standards

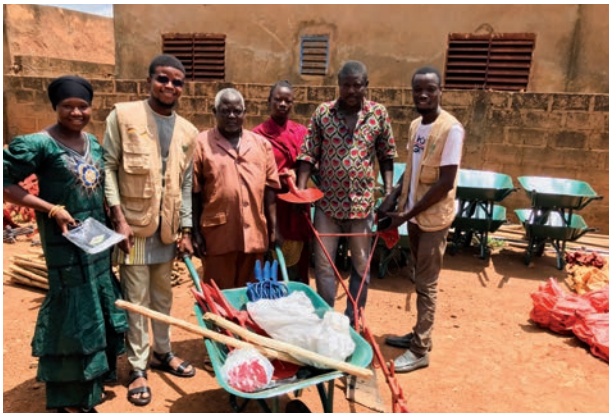
CASE STUDY: GOOD EXAMPLES VERSUS BAD EXAMPLES

Analysis and evaluation: A child eats leftovers surrounded by rubbish and dirt - an image that shows poverty and hunger in a drastic and most of all stereotypical way. It serves Western clichés about poverty in the Global South and promotes a distorted view of the world in which poverty is portrayed as omnipresent, hopeless and passive. The imagery is aimed at strong emotions and seeks to generate compassion rather than inform or enlighten in a differentiated way. Such depictions reduce complex realities of life to a moment of suffering and utilize stereotypical clichés. The picture shows no background, no context and no solutions. It focusses on the moment of shock. It gives no indication of the structural causes of hunger or how help actually works. No people are shown who act independently or work on solutions. This reinforces the image of passive 'recipients' of help.



© Pixabay

Analysis and evaluation: The scene shows a group of people collecting tools and materials for an aid project. The atmosphere is friendly and approachable, everyone seems confident and committed. Wheelbarrows and other tools in the background, indicating that sustainable aid for self-help is being provided here. This image is a positive example of the fight against hunger and poverty because it shows people not as passive recipients of aid, but as active creators of their own future. They are supported to take responsibility and work together to find solutions to their challenges. Their dignity and individuality are respected, they are not reduced to their plight but are portrayed as personalities with the power to act. The picture shows how support works on an equal footing and how helping people to help themselves has a long-term effect. Instead of generating pity, the image encourages and inspires - it stands for modern, respectful and solution-orientated communication in development cooperation. It is constructive and solution-orientated.



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Andreas Lerg,
Press- and public relations officer
ADRA Deutschland e.V.

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STORY-OWNING:
REPRESENTATION, POWER, AND THE FUTURE OF HUMANITARIAN NARRATIVES

THE ISSUE

THE CHALLENGE OF HUMANITARIAN COMMUNICATION - BRIDGING PRINCIPLES AND PUBLIC PERCEPTION

A Mental Health and Psychological Support workshop for elderly refugees at a shelter in Lviv, Ukraine. © Paula Bronstein/HIAS

Storytelling is one of the most powerful tools humanitarians have. How else would we be able to close geographic and cultural distances, making it possible for someone sitting in comfort and safety to connect with the suffering of someone they will never meet? But power comes with responsibility, and we must make sure that we tell stories ethically, truthfully, and in ways that protect and empower the people at their heart.

As humanitarians and communicators at HIAS, our first duty is to do no harm. We know that stories build empathy, but can also reinforce harmful power dynamics, strip away dignity, or even endanger the people we aim to support. The future of humanitarian storytelling should, in fact, be more akin to facilitating "story-owning", as we work to shift power back to displaced communities themselves.

THE AGE OF UNFILTERED TESTIMONY

The humanitarian communication field is changing rapidly. As recently as a decade ago, humanitarians and journalists were the primary, and often only, sources of public information in a crisis. But today, people affected by conflict and disasters often have smartphones and internet access, enabling them to broadcast their experiences to global audiences in real-time.

From Ukraine to Gaza, raw and unfiltered testimonies are no longer mediated or carefully edited. These direct accounts are immensely powerful but can also be emotionally overwhelming. For audiences living in safer conditions, access to a potentially constant stream of suffering has not necessarily deepened empathy but has inured them to it. It is no longer enough to look away from the news: the consequences of humanitarian crises are right there on your screen, uninvited, unedited, and often unbearable.

In this shifting environment, it is only natural that we, as humanitarian communicators, do some soul-searching. What is our role now? In this new landscape, are we even needed? And if so, how can we add value when the media is already flooded with stories?

At HIAS, we believe that we do have a role. Instead of gatekeepers, we are context-givers, sense-makers, and, most importantly, allies. Our job is not to replace the voices of people affected by plights, but to uplift them,

responsibly and ethically, while helping wider audiences understand the broader causes of crises, their human consequences, and pathways to action.

HUMANITARIAN PRINCIPLES IN PRACTICE

The idea to write a HIAS Guide to Ethical Storytelling for humanitarians was inspired by this evolving understanding. We envisioned it as a practical tool for communications professionals working with displaced and other crisis-impacted people, grounded in both humanitarian principles and an honest reckoning with the power we hold.

There is no doubt in our minds that ethical storytelling starts with fully informed consent. This is not simply presenting people with a form to sign. It means explaining clearly, in a language the storyteller understands, how their story might be used, where it might appear, and what risks that might entail. Obtaining a signature is not the end of the process, since ethical storytelling also means offering the right to withdraw consent, to request anonymity, and to opt out of having their image published at any time, even if they have agreed to share their story.

Such rigour is necessary because the stakes are high. For example, publishing identifiable details about someone still at risk could expose them to danger; a story that is shortened for editorial reasons could wind up appearing inconsistent with a person's official asylum claim and, however inadvertently, could jeopardize their legal case. These are serious, real concerns, and as such, they demand a high level of vigilance and precision.

Ethics go beyond protection: they also call for a deep respect for the individuals we talk to and for their experiences. Many people we work with have already survived deep violations of their rights, and when we ask them to recount their stories, we are really demanding they be vulnerable in front of us. The least we can do is treat their willingness to share as the profound act of trust that it is.

AVOIDING THE "PERFECT REFUGEE" TRAP

One of the most insidious tendencies in humanitarian storytelling is elevating the so-called "perfect refugee", someone who is considered to be an outstanding example or success story: the highly educated engineer, the rags-to-riches entrepreneur, the Olympic athlete, or the doctor who saves lives in her new community.

There is nothing wrong with celebrating stories of refugee excellence, but when we let them dominate our narratives, they create and reinforce the dangerous idea that only exceptional people are worthy of empathy, support, or a new beginning.

The reality is that most displaced people are ordinary people; it is their circumstances that are extraordinary. Not all of them have big dreams. In fact, many just want safety and stability. Some will thrive in their new communities, while others may struggle to adapt under the weight of trauma, bureaucracy, and exclusion. All of their stories matter.

Our role is to present people as whole human beings, not victims or heroes, but complex individuals with agency and dignity.

SHIFTING THE POWER DYNAMIC

As we go forward in the process of storytelling in the humanitarian field, we need to keep in mind that power dynamics are always present between the organization and the individual.

At HIAS, we are committed to being accountable to the affected populations we serve by acknowledging the inherent power dynamic and using that power responsibly. We start by being transparent about who we are and why we are asking for someone's story. We then make sure it is clear that participation will not lead to financial compensation or preferential treatment.

A positive masculinity workshop for the prevention of gender-based violence in Panama, on the Darien Gap migration route, part of a transnational project by HIAS and Médecins du Monde funded by ECHO. © Nadege Mazars / HIAS

> "The reality is that most displaced people are ordinary people; it is their circumstances that are extraordinary."

During the interview, we listen carefully to both verbal and non-verbal cues and respect the storyteller's boundaries. If someone becomes uncomfortable, we pause. If they say no, we stop. Whenever possible, we co-create stories with the individuals involved.

It is important to note that none of this is foolproof. We make mistakes, and when that happens, it is our duty to acknowledge them, learn from them, and do better.

STORYTELLING AS SOLIDARITY

In the past, humanitarian stories were mostly designed to evoke pity and to centre the audience's emotions rather than the storyteller's experience. Now we know that pity is a weak foundation for solidarity. It doesn't inspire meaningful action, only passive compassion.

With ethical storytelling, we are aiming for something deeper, a recognition of shared humanity, the feeling that any of us could be the one seeking refuge, a push to act — to support policies, services, and societies that respect the rights and dignity of all people, regardless of where they're from or what they've been through.

This is not always easy. Donors expect emotional impact, the audience's attention spans are getting shorter and shorter, and media outlets prioritise drama and controversy.

In a world oversaturated with content, humanitarian communication must evolve. We will not engage our audiences by counting on unique access to crises anymore, nor by shouting louder than others, but by listening better.

HIAS Chad staff visit the agricultural project of an economic inclusion programme participant in Begonro, Chad. © Kouakaine Moundi/HIAS

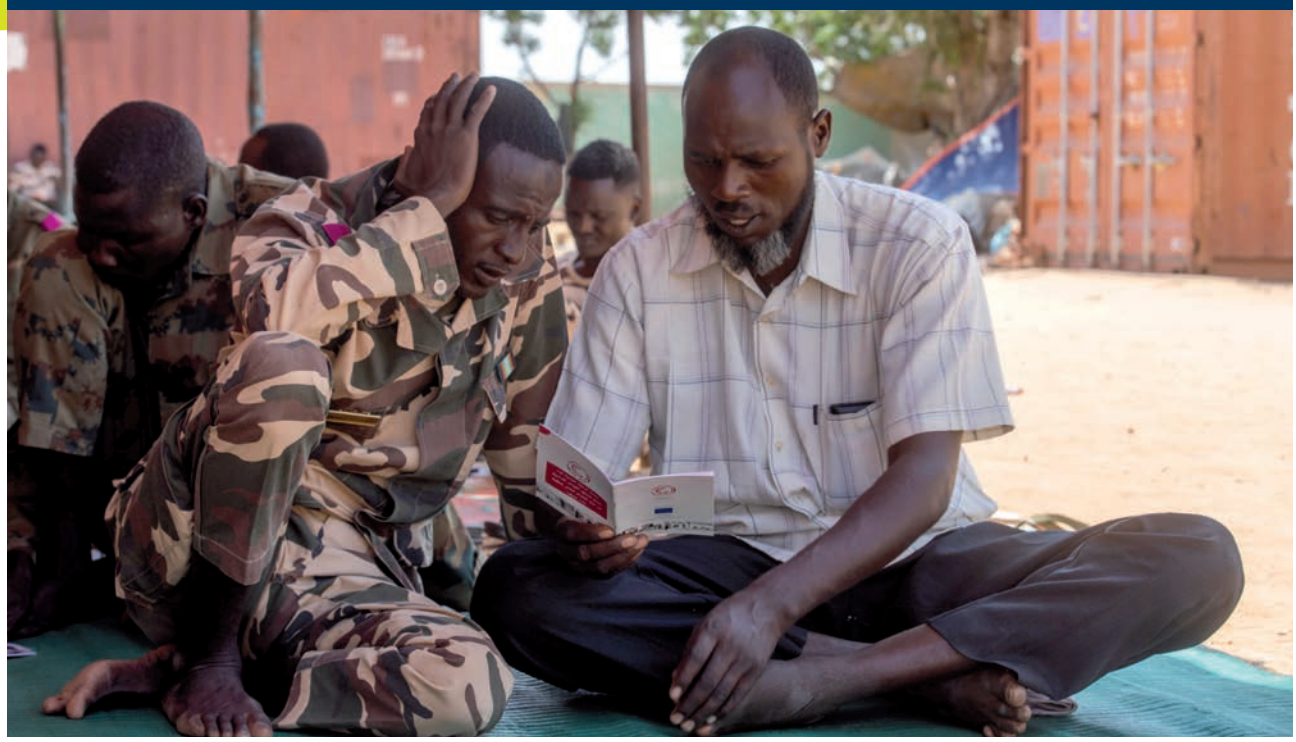
Storytelling must be part of the humanitarian field's reckoning with questions of the practice and ethos of accountability to affected populations. This is all about acknowledging the power dynamic between humanitarian organisations and participants. The stories we tell have the potential to shape perceptions and policies, an enormous responsibility. As such, we need to stay focused but open to change, treating testimonies as a gift. In the end, these stories were never ours to begin with.

HIAS Europe

MANAGING MISINFORMATION AND DISINFORMATION IN THE HUMANITARIAN SPACE:
LESSONS FROM GENEVA CALL'S OPERATIONAL ENGAGEMENT WITH ARMED GROUPS AND DE FACTO AUTHORITIES (AGDAS)

THE ISSUE

THE CHALLENGE OF HUMANITARIAN COMMUNICATION - BRIDGING PRINCIPLES AND PUBLIC PERCEPTION



© Geneva Call

Civilians at Heart, a humanitarian organisation, delivers food, clean water supplies, and basic medications to remote communities in the Nolant region, affected by armed conflict. Days before a new convoy is supposed to arrive, rumors circulated the aid is causing sickness. Tensions increased. One Civilians at Heart local staff member overheard a child say, 'Mama said their food makes you sick". Quickly, commanders who had previously consented to safe passage began to change their minds and revoked access for the Civilians at Heart trucks. To handle the situation, local Civilian at Heart personnel engaged directly with villagers, sent small groups to dialogue quietly with commanders, sit with village elders, bringing samples of the aid. Allow people to touch, see, and inquire. "This is real," a community health worker said quietly as she joined them. This is how my sister survived." The road was once again open. Trust was restored. Some people still were not convinced, and rumours continued, but days later, the convoy arrived in Nolant delivering essential assistance. This scenario may resonate with many humanitarian organisations: misinformation and disinformation pose many challenges – Yet, as this example shows, humanitarian organisations can take steps to manage.

In armed conflicts settings, information can be particularly consequential. Whether intentional or by mistake, false information and misinformation can change people's opinions, make them less trusting, and make it harder for people who really need humanitarian protection to get it. Also, detrimental information could lead to breaches of international humanitarian law (IHL) or international human rights law (IHRL), thus, would put civilians in danger. Misinformation (false information supplied without harmful intent) and disinformation (wrong information shared on intention to mislead or manipulate) can easily get confused. In armed conflict settings, false information or rumours are utilized or circulated for political or military benefit. This might put both humanitarian workers and civilians in danger. Hate speech, which includes encouraging prejudice, rage, or violence against people or groups, usually makes the impacts of inaccurate information and misinformation worse[1].

1. Report - A Conceptual Analysis of the Overlaps and Differences between Hate Speech, Misinformation and Disinformation (June 2024)

Geneva Call[2] engages with armed groups and de facto and/or provisional authorities (AGDAs) based on normative commitments to International Humanitarian Norms. These engagements are often made through the Deeds of Commitment[3]. These commitments cover a wide range of thematic areas, including protecting children, banning sexual violence, and protecting healthcare, cultural heritage, and more. In addition to these normative engagements, humanitarian messaging and advocacy techniques are essential.

This article examines how Geneva Call integrates both proactive, reactive, and precautionary approaches at multiple levels to assess risks related to misinformation. In IHL, the concept of harm is a significant framework for analysing the legal and humanitarian consequences of misinformation and disinformation in Armed Conflict situations. The purpose of IHL is to limit the harmful effects of armed conflicts on civilians.

Geneva Call recognizes three distinct operational contexts: (1) where civilian harm is possible but has not yet occurred (Proactive approach). In this case, Geneva Call's preventive measures, risk assessments, and operational planning for AGDAs involvement and community engagement all include a proactive approach (2) where harm has already occurred. Geneva Call uses the responsive approach to immediately pause, reflect, verify information and consider its operational response while staying impartial and principled (Responsive approach); and (3) where disinformation disseminates without producing evident harm. (Precautionary approach). The precautionary strategy calls for continuous monitoring efforts close coordination with identified stakeholders, concentrated capacity-building, and being ready to escalate the response level if the risk of harm increases. Each situations needs a different response.

I. PROACTIVE APPROACH: ANTICIPATING AND MITIGATING RISKS

(No misinformation/disinformation but potential harm)

When working with AGDAs and communities, Geneva Call has put in place specific operational safeguards to proactively monitor the information environment. Some of these are:

- Setting up direct lines of communication with trusted local community leaders, helps stop false stories from spreading and enables real-time clarification when doubts arise.
- Tracking online narratives, especially in volatile contexts, can offer early signs of emerging disinformation campaigns. This empowers organizations to respond before narratives spiral goes out of control.

It's important for Geneva Call to publicly reiterate humanitarian values, its mission, tools, and methods, especially in high-risk situations.

A. AGDA Engagement: Building Trust Through Advocacy and Dialogue

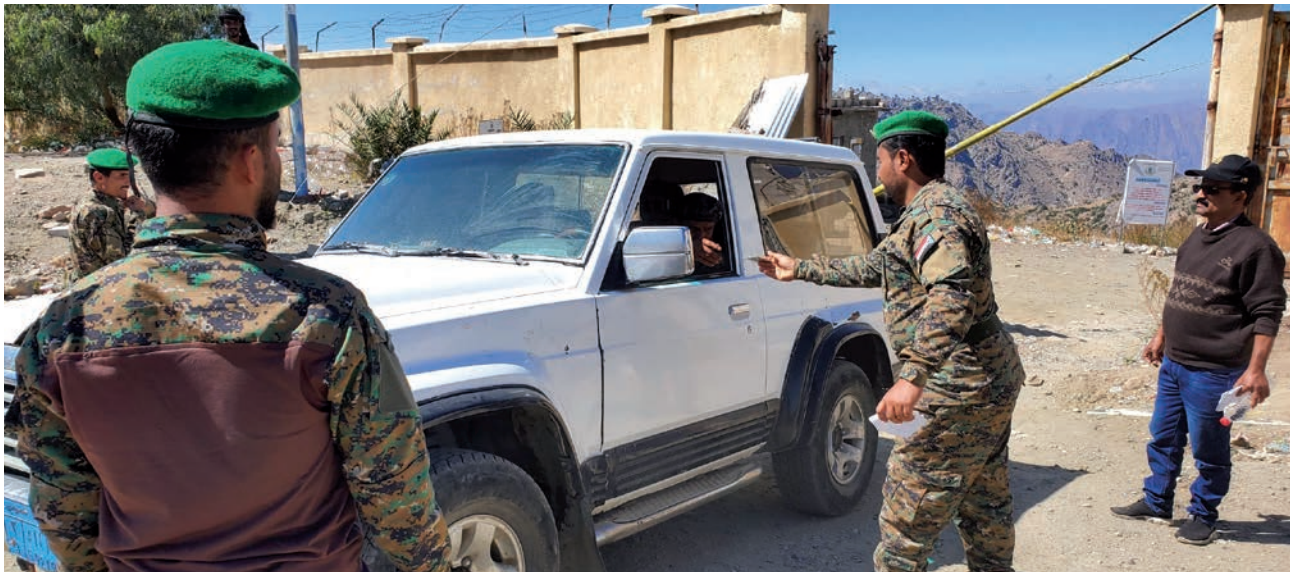
Geneva Call sees engaging AGDAs as a long-term constructive process based on mutual respect that aims to foster compliance with international humanitarian norms and respect for humanitarian principles. Before starting activities in a specific context, and from the first contact, Geneva Call works to align expectations, explain the humanitarian nature of its work, clarify the distinct role of Geneva Call from political actors and peacebuilding agendas, and make sure that AGDA leaders, local civil society, and community leaders receive dedicated mission briefings. This is all done to strengthen Geneva Call's role as a neutral humanitarian actor.

In addition, when designing policy and advocacy materials, Geneva Call undertakes a need assessment to ensure that advocacy and humanitarian messaging materials include a culturally appropriate framing. Additionally, in many cases, these materials are translated into local languages and visual formats that make them accessible and easy to understand. Geneva Call runs these sessions, which are often co-led by local staff or partners who are contextually trusted. This helps to make the message more relevant and credible. More broadly, improving internal coordination among projects, communications, and security teams is critical to maintaining consistent message, and assess risks related to the potential harm of misinformation.

B. Community Engagement: Narrative Management as a Protection Tool

In contexts of armed conflicts, effective humanitarian engagement with local communities requires sustained, context-sensitive advocacy and humanitarian messaging strategies. In Geneva Call, field teams, who include community mobilizers, are trained to actively collect, check, and analyse information, AGDAs concerns, and community perception. To do that, Geneva Call uses trusted local channels including tribe chiefs, religious leaders,

2. Geneva Call | Protecting civilians in armed conflict
3. How we work | Geneva Call
4. How harmful information on social media impacts people affected by armed conflict: A typology of harms, International Review of the Red Cross, No. 926, August 14, 2024



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and community radio to channel correct information. Moreover, Geneva Call continuously monitor digital and traditional information venues, such as local radio, digital channels, and social media, to identify emerging false information stories that could be considered as a risk for it mission, operations, and its staff safety. Most importantly, Geneva Call focuses on community dialogue sessions that translate legal norms into accessible, culturally resonant narratives, helping communities understand their rights, responsibilities, and roles during armed conflict. These initiatives contribute to long-term behavioural change among AGDAs and communities alike, fostering an environment less susceptible to manipulation and more resilient to disinformation.

II. RESPONSIVE APPROACH: WHEN DISINFORMATION/ MISINFORMATION OCCURS

(Misinformation/Disinformation occurred and harm happened)

In many fragile contexts misinformation and disinformation can result in operational disruptions, loss of access, or even security risks for humanitarian actors and communities. When harm has already happened, such as backlash against AGDA engagement, resistance from the community, or loss to reputation, Geneva Call integrates rapid context analysis into its risk assessment process, a practice aligned with the ICRC's "Addressing Harmful Information in Conflict Settings" framework[5], which emphasizes the need for 360-degree response strategies to harmful narratives in armed conflict.

Moreover, echoing the UN's Verified campaign launched during the COVID-19 pandemic[6], a core principle is "pause before you share". This reflexive step helps mitigate what the EU Civil Protection & Humanitarian Aid Operations Directorate (ECHO) refers to as "information manipulation harm"[7]—the unintended consequences of reacting to falsehoods too quickly, or in a way that plays into adversarial tactics. In addition to localized messaging to counter false information using community-trusted voices, Geneva Call may- when required-turns to issue clarification messages through local platforms or any trusted accessible channel. The objective of these advocacy strategies is to reaffirm Geneva Call's humanitarian mandate across accessible platforms to local populations and armed groups. More importantly, adapting future advocacy and humanitarian messaging strategies based on lessons learned is instrumental to improve proactive responses and enhance reactiveness.

This approach has been especially impactful in high intensity conflict contexts where Geneva Call as many international humanitarian actors could have faced misinformation campaigns, which could have seriously disrupted their activities. In particularly sensitive contexts, Geneva Call responded by continuous dialogues with communities as well as by reinforcing

5. Addressing Harmful information in conflicts setting: A response Framework for International Organization 4812_002-ebook.pdf
6. UN's Verified campaign and "Pause. Take care before you share." message promoted for social sharing restraints. UNRIC, *Pause before sharing* (June 2020)
7. ECHO's "information manipulation harm" framing, urging caution in reacting to misinformation amid crises. EU Civil Protection & Humanitarian Aid, *Information manipulation and misinformation* EU Civil Protection Aid

> "In today's humanitarian world, where perception often affects access and acceptance, communication is not a side activity; it is at the heart of moral, effective humanitarian action."

the neutrality of its mandate and restoring conditions for continued humanitarian engagement. More broadly, when communities, AGDAs, and local actors are capacitated to independently counter false narratives, humanitarian engagement becomes more sustainable, and the protection of civilians more durable.

III. PRECAUTIONARY APPROACH: INTEGRATING ADVOCACY AND HUMANITARIAN MESSAGING INTO MONITORING AND EVALUATION

(No Harm Yet, but Misinformation Present)

Geneva Call uses a precautionary approach in places where false information is present but not causing immediate harm. This approach is based on continuous monitoring, strategic anticipation, and community involvement. By systematically integrating advocacy and humanitarian messages into its monitoring and learning system, Geneva Call keep engaging with AGDAs and communities in a way that is both successful and constructive.

Field teams do thorough situational assessments to find out where harm due to disinformation could be forseen, which communication routes are reliable, and how the stories that are going around might affect Geneva Call humanitarian engagement, operations and staff safety. This is backed up by continuous stakeholder analysis, which includes regular meetings with local leaders, civil society groups, and media representatives to stay ahead of changes in the information landscape.

A top aim is to improve the skills of workers and partners so they can spot and understand early warning indications of harmful misinformation. Also, early warning systems are set up to keep an eye on signs that disinformation dangers are rising, so that responses can be quick and appropriate for the situation. Intervention may not be necessary at this moment; nonetheless, contingency plans, encompassing communication strategies and escalation protocols, are established to ensure a prompt response should conditions worsen. Ultimately, these efforts ensure that communication is not solely crisis-driven but also facilitates sustained improvements in awareness, trust, and compliance with humanitarian principles.

CONCLUSION

In today's humanitarian world, where perception often affects access and acceptance, communication is not a side activity; it is at the heart of moral, effective humanitarian action. The experience of Geneva Call demonstrates that legal norm-based, field-based advocacy implemented through reliable local networks, can fortify ethical and legal commitments, preserve humanitarian space, and enhance the legitimacy and effect of collaborating with AGDAs. By making humanitarian messaging and advocacy a protection instrument, Geneva Call is still making humanitarian access and civilian protection safer and more reliable in some of the world's most complicated conflict zones. More importantly, all components of the humanitarian sector are encouraged to strengthen collective responses to disinformation. Shared media protocols, joint messaging, and information-sharing among agencies, INGOs and local grassroots organisations can help prevent any fragmentation that may be exploited.

Geneva Call

VOICE KEY HIGHLIGHTS:
DECOLONISING HUMANITARIAN ACTION: SHIFTING POWER, VOICES, AND RESOURCES

THE ISSUE

THE CHALLENGE OF HUMANITARIAN COMMUNICATION - BRIDGING PRINCIPLES AND PUBLIC PERCEPTION

This paper is a summary of the main ideas discussed during the event and does not necessarily reflect the speakers' or the VOICE network's opinions.

Colonialism is not confined to history. The imposition of a western centric model is still dominant on how the world is perceived, narrated.

Decolonising humanitarian assistance entails rethinking and reshaping the structures, practices, and narratives that underpin the global aid system to address the legacies of colonialism and power imbalances. The history of aid is deeply intertwined with colonialism, where many modern aid practices evolved from systems designed to serve imperial interests rather than address the needs of colonised peoples. Early humanitarian efforts often mirrored colonial hierarchies, with aid being delivered in ways that reinforced dependency and the superiority of Western powers. These colonial legacies persist today, as power and decision-making within the humanitarian sector remain concentrated in the Global North, often marginalising the voices and agency of those directly affected by crises.

Decolonising humanitarian assistance calls for a fundamental shift from paternalistic and externally driven interventions to approaches that centre local expertise, agency, and ownership. This process involves dismantling systems that perpetuate dependency, inequality, and exclusion, while promoting equitable partnerships, mutual accountability, and cultural relevance. Crucially, the ultimate objective of the humanitarian aid system is to render itself obsolete by building systems, capacities, and structures that empower communities to respond to their own needs independently. This requires not only a redistribution of resources and decision-making but also a commitment to addressing root causes of inequality and vulnerability, including systemic injustices and historical exploitation. By fostering a more inclusive, just, and sustainable model, decolonising humanitarian assistance seeks to transform the sector into one that genuinely supports resilience, dignity, and self-determination, paving the way for a future where external aassistance is no longer a necessity.

This report delves into these controversial themes, drawing insights from the panel of experts who convened at the VOICE event 'Decolonising Humanitarian Action: Shifting Power, Voices, and Resources' in November 2024 in Brussels to open the debate on Decolonising Humanitarian Action. It aims to explore how to shift powers, voices, and ressources, reflecting on the linkage between colonialism and the current framework for humanitarian while providing ideas for future steps to decolonise the sector.

Panelists:

- Tammam Aloudat, CEO, The New Humanitarian
- Alessandra De Guio, Senior Advisor for Humanitarian Capacity, Mercy Corps
- Michael Vincent Mercado, Voice and Insight lab Team Manager, Center for Disaster Preparedness
- Abimbola Ogundairo, Advocacy and Campaigns lead, Africa No Filter
- Marie-Rose Romain Murphy, Co-Founder and Board President, Haiti Community Foundation; President, RMC-Romain Murphy Consulting; Co-Chair, Pledge for Change Global Advisory Expert Panel

Moderator:

- Maria Groenewald, Director, VOICE

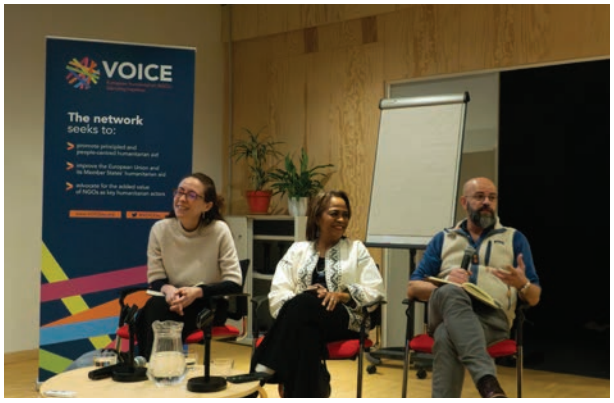
Closing remarks:

- Pauline Chetcuti, President, VOICE; Head of Humanitarian Campaigns and Advocacy, Oxfam International

UNDERSTANDING THE ISSUE AND CHALLENGES IN SHIFTING POWER DYNAMICS

The understanding of the issue and challenged in the current framework humanitarians operate was at the core of the first round of discussion. Participants were invited to share their insights on the challenges in shifting the power dynamics.

Tammam Aloudat, CEO of the New Humanitarian, highlighted that the humanitarian system is deeply rooted in colonial power dynamics, perpetuating hierarchies and prioritising certain lives over others. This "Humanitarian Industrial Complex" often prioritising its own interests and maintainaing existing power structures rather than truly serving affected communities. The concept of "neutrality" in humanitarian work is frequently a façade, masking political choices that maintain the status quo. Some solutions presented today are veneers applied to a defective system (e.g Diversity, Equity and Inclusion, localisation). Furthermore, dominant narratives in humanitarianism are often Eurocentric, failing to acknowledge and value diverse perspectives and local knowledge, hindering genuine community-led solutions.



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The element of narratives was addressed by Abimbola Ogundairo, Advocacy and Campaigns lead at Africa No Filter. Dominant narratives in humanitarianism often perpetuate harmful stereotypes, portraying affected communities as passive victims and limiting their agency. Narratives impact on three levels: on community-level/personal level, it impacts their representation of themselves and are limiting the communities and the 54 countries to one single continent where it is known several contexts operate. On the continental level, we see an impact on the investments, narratives costs money, according to Africa no Filter, narratives are costing up to $4.2 billion annually in interest payments. These narratives have significant consequences, including limiting funding, shaping international perceptions, and impacting the self-perception of affected communities. The "saviour complex," where international actors present themselves as saviours, reinforces dependency and undermines local leadership, hindering genuine community-led solutions.

Marie-Rose Romain Murphy, Co-Founder and Board President of the Haiti Community Foundation, and Michael Vincent Mercado, Voice and Insight lab Team Manager at Center for Disaster Preparedness, spoke on how the humanitarian system is often dominated by external actors, marginalising the voices and needs of affected communities. Romain Murphy addressed this issue in the context of the Haiti earthquake in 2010. Decisions regarding aid and development were frequently made by external actors, with limited input from local communities. This lack of local ownership, coupled with existing power structures and aid modalities, often perpetuated existing inequalities and hindered genuine development or nation building. She highlighted it was not just about confronting external forces; internalized oppression within communities must also be addressed in order to dismantle the ingrained belief of inferiority and powerlessness within communities.

Following her intervention, Mercado highlighted the importance of addressing the root causes of vulnerability, particularly poverty. While humanitarian assistance is crucial during disasters, the foundation believes that long-term development solutions should focus on empowering local communities. This is achieved through community-led initiatives funded by solidarity funds, which allow local organizations to address their unique challenges without imposing external models. The foundation also critiques the Eurocentric approaches often imposed by INGOs (International Non-Governmental Organisations), emphasizing the need for a deeper understanding of indigenous cultures and community dynamics. Trust is a key issue, as local communities often feel that INGOs impose reporting structures that prioritise external goals over real community needs. The foundation advocates for more localised, humanised partnerships where communities have a greater say in how development and disaster response efforts are implemented. By focusing on community participation and leadership, the foundation believes it is possible to build more sustainable and equitable solutions to poverty and vulnerability.

Alessandra De Guio, Senior Advisor for Humanitarian Capacity at Mercy Corps, discussed the evolution of her organisation's approach to shifting power towards local communities, emphasizing the importance of centring community perspectives through equitable, long-term partnerships built on trust and respect. This involves internal cultural shifts fostering humility and inclusivity, operationalizing principles of equity, humility, complementarity, and accountability across all organizational processes, including recruitment, performance assessments, and learning. De Guio stressed that achieving a true power shift requires sustained effort, patience, a willingness to embrace new ways of working, and a fundamental rethinking of how organisations operate.

This part of the discussion was concluded by spontaneous intervention from Diletta Libenzi, Plan International junior ECHO partnership officer. She emphasised the importance of decolonising humanitarian assistance and acknowledges the privilege and influence that INGOs hold in this debate. Rather than offering a singular solution, Plan views this as a continuous journey of learning,

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collaboration, and sharing with local and national partners. The organisation prioritises equitable partnerships through its "Better Partnership Principle" regularly seeking feedback from local partners to improve practices. She also highlighted the need to rethink language within the sector, criticising terms like "beneficiaries" that foster dependency and create a "saviour" mentality. Plan is committed to addressing decolonisation as a structural issue, ensuring that children and youth advocates are central to these discussions and empowered to take part. Libenzi concluded by urging her peers to reflect on their position within the sector, asking how INGOs can create space for local actors and step back to allow others to lead in the process of change.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS AND NEXT STEPS IN DECOLONISING HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE

The second round of questions focused on exploring the future of humanitarian assistance. Attention was drawn to what concrete steps could be taken to decolonise practices and the sector.

Tammam Aloudat (The New Humanitarian) reflected on the importance of addressing systemic injustices with urgency and honesty. He criticised the expectation placed to discuss politely profound issues such as genocide, the rise of fascism, and the failures of Western liberalism. He called for the productive use of anger as a catalyst for change and boldly criticised the root causes of these injustices, including capitalism, colonialism, patriarchy, and historical inequities. True decolonisation needed to move beyond isolated efforts and the humanitarian bubble, requiring a global approach to challenging systemic power structures, he explained. He advocated for praxis—a collaborative, iterative process of learning and doing together—that rejected the exclusionary language of expertise and centred the voices of those most affected. He also emphasised the importance of solidarity across movements for social justice, warning against siloed efforts that could be easily undermined in the face of rising fascism and oppression. Aloudat argued that decolonisation had to happen through grassroots action and mutual learning, not imposed by those in power. He criticised the corporate models that perpetuate inequality and urged for a systemic and political approach that actively opposed injustice and oppression. This requires moving beyond Eurocentric models and embracing diverse perspectives, including those of affected communities. Furthermore, acknowledging that "neutrality" is a political choice necessitates a willingness to take a stand on issues of justice and equity. Finally, prioritising local leadership by empowering local organizations and communities to lead their own recovery and development efforts is essential for achieving true decolonisation in humanitarian action.

Marie-Rose Romain Murphy (Haiti Community Foundation) reflected on efforts to become increasingly strategic in addressing systemic issues. She emphasised the need to reinvent systems rather than merely improving outdated ones. Acknowledging the complexity of current crises, she pointed out that Western societies had often failed due to rigid structural silos, creating anxiety and stagnation. She highlighted her involvement in Pledge for Change, an initiative focused on building fairer ecosystems through principles like solidarity, equity, and self-definition.

Romain Murphy discussed her experiences working with global leaders to implement meaningful changes. She critiqued the inconsistency in applying equitable practices, often relying on personal goodwill rather than institutional accountability. She noted that despite progress, many organisations failed to integrate evaluations into their learning, leading to repeated mistakes. Through Pledge for Change, she sought to address these issues by fostering transparency, accountability, and collaborative problem-solving, while pushing for honest dialogue and practical action.

Romain Murphy emphasised the need to move beyond short-term projects and embracing long-term, sustainable approaches that support local development and nation-building is crucial. She expressed hope that Pledge for Change would serve as a forum for genuine, solutions-focused conversations and a platform for dismantling systemic barriers in aid and development practices. She ended her intervention by acknowledging and addressing the systemic issues that contribute to vulnerability and inequality, such as weak governance and lack of access to resources, is essential for achieving lasting and equitable change.

In the Philippines, the Center for Disaster Preparedness adopted an innovative approach to promote inclusive funding and community empowerment, acknowledging the country's strong oral traditions and diverse local contexts, explained Michael Vincent Mercado. By enabling organisations to submit proposals via video or in local languages, the initiative addressed barriers posed by limited access to formal education. Trust-building replaced transactional relationships, allowing many organisations to receive significant funding for the first time. This support facilitated accreditation, granting access to government funding, banking services, and other resources, thereby enhancing their legitimacy and capacity. A community solidarity fund of $390,000 supported 32 organisations, which collectively mobilised an additional $530,000. The flexible use of funds empowered communities to address their specific needs. Mercado emphasised the importance of preserving the spirit of volunteerism, countering the negative effects of external cash-for-work schemes that had eroded community solidarity. The initiative fostered collaboration and knowledge-sharing across sectors such as women,

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farmers, indigenous peoples, and LGBTQ+ groups, addressing the unique needs of coastal, mountainous, and island communities. Mercado stressed that learning was central to lasting change, with shared practices and experiences strengthening community-led solutions over time.

Alessandra De Guio discussed Mercy Corps' partnership approach, emphasising complementarity and valuing the unique strengths of each local partner. The aim is to structure shared work in a way that empowers each party and allows them to contribute meaningfully. Traditionally, INGOs have prioritised local organisations with management experiences, prior INGO collaboration, financial management expertise, and formal compliance procedures. However, De Guio argued that other capacities are equally crucial for project success, particularly those related to community engagement and accountability, acknowledging the importance of power dynamics. De Guio provided a concrete example from a FCDO-funded project in Kenya focused on reducing vulnerability to recruitment into violent groups. The project needed to work with small community groups who had direct access to the targeted individuals in hard-to-reach areas. These groups, despite having less experience in programmatic reporting, were ideal partners since the risk of working with more traditional NGOs who lacked this community access was deemed greater. Consequently, the project partnered with nine similar organisations and achieved significant success. This experience led to a shift in approach. De Guio explained their team is now mapping all local partners for future collaborations, focusing on their ability to engage with and be accountable to local communities, and whether they are representative of community interests. This mapping process is expected to broaden the types of partners, including community groups, they work with, ultimately shaping their work through the contributions and insights of these partners.

Finally, Abimbola Ogundairo emphasised the importance of shifting narratives to reflect a more empowering and collaborative approach to humanitarian assistance. She noted that the answers to pressing questions about consultancy and practices were already present in the room, citing prior discussions about collaboration, anger, and disruption as vital tools for change. Ogundairo highlighted the need to disrupt outdated narratives by replacing them with progressive ones, illustrating her point with an example of a musician who resisted misrepresentative charity narratives and rallied collective action for a petition. She stressed that narratives should showcase local agency and progress, rather than dependency or external intervention. Ogundairo urged the audience to be intentional in their storytelling, ensuring that it reflects their values—whether it be facilitating development rather than providing it, or recognising progress as stemming from local capacity rather than external aid. Ultimately, she tied the redistribution of power, voices, and resources to the transformation of narratives, advocating for stories that empower and truly represent those they aim to serve.

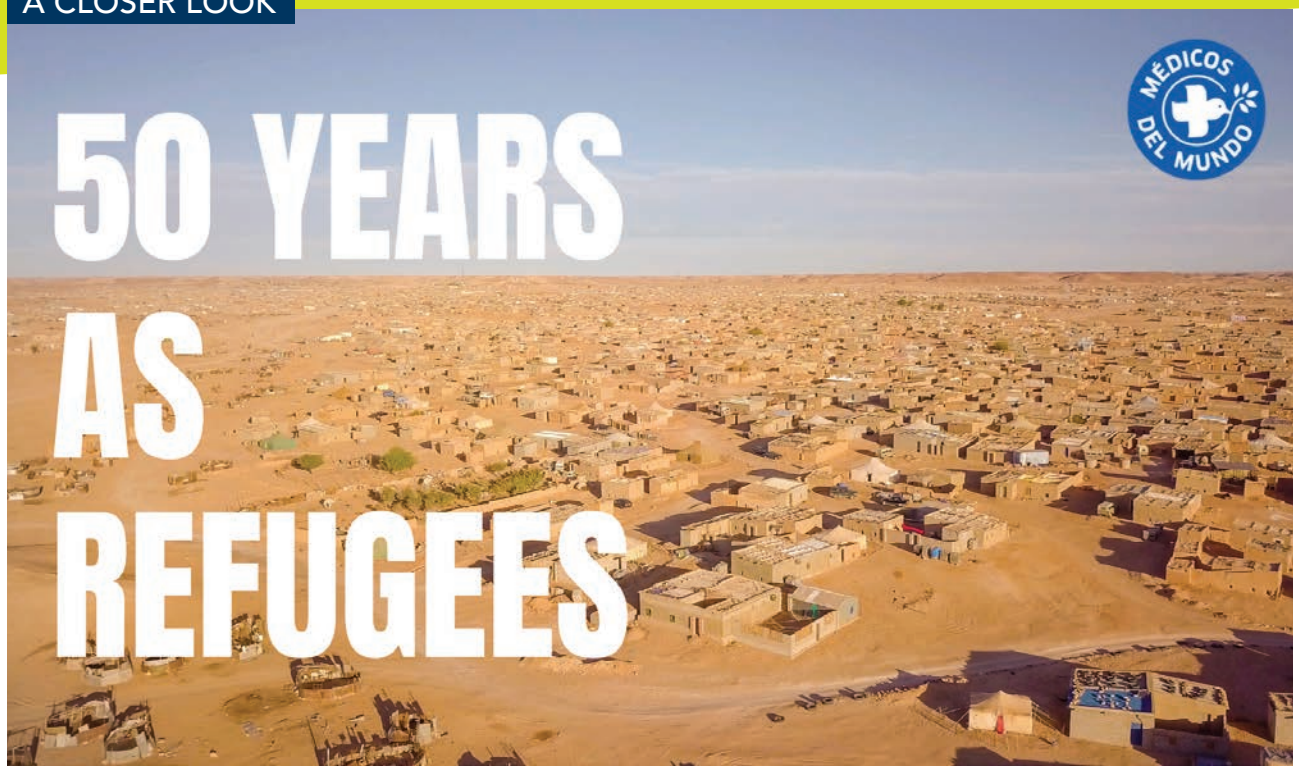
KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Decentralise decision-making with community-led initiatives. By placing decision-making power in the hands of affected communities and local responders, moving away from top-down approaches.
2. Amplify local voices and deconstruct stereotypes. Narratives should be centered around affected communities, allowing them to tell their own stories and challenge dominant narratives and stereotypes of affected communities, putting emphasis on their resilience and agency.
3. Prioritise ethical storytelling. Moving away from sensationalised and often exploitative portrayals of suffering. Promoting respectful representation to ensure narratives are accurate.
4. Address colonial legacies by acknowledging the history and deconstruct power dynamics.
5. Reform funding structures to increase funding to local actors. One possible solution would be to have direct funding mechanisms, with no intermediaries. Adapting the proposal modalities to the local organisations.
6. Challenge the principle of "neutrality". Recognising the political nature of humanitarian action, neutrality in itself is a political choice.
7. Foster genuine Partnership with local communities and actors. Engage with local actors with greater access and accountability to communities.

Caroline Correia,
Junior Advocacy Officer, VOICE

HEALTH IN EXILE:
UPHOLDING THE RIGHT TO DIGNIT FOR THE SAHRAWI PEOPLE

A CLOSER LOOK



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This year marks the 50th anniversary of the Sahrawi exile, half a century of prolonged refuge in a situation of absolute dependence on humanitarian aid.

For over 50 year, more than 173,000 Sahrawi refugees have endured extreme conditions in the Tindouf camps in Algeria. In this protracted displacement, *health*—physical, mental and community-based—has become not a luxury but a matter of survival. For three decades, Médicos del Mundo Spain has stood as a key witness and advocate for the Sahrawi right to health. Today, with vital services nearing collapse, the time for words has passed—what's needed now is unwavering **economic commitment**, particularly from the European Union.

On 13 and 14 May, the Consortium of NGOs in Sahrawi Refugee Camps, made up of 18 humanitarian organisations operating on the ground, implemented a political advocacy agenda with high-level EU institutions such as the EAS, ECHO and the European Parliament. The aim of this agenda was to convey an urgent appeal to EU authorities to alert them to the systematic deterioration of the humanitarian situation and to urge the competent bodies to take the necessary measures before the damage becomes irreparable.

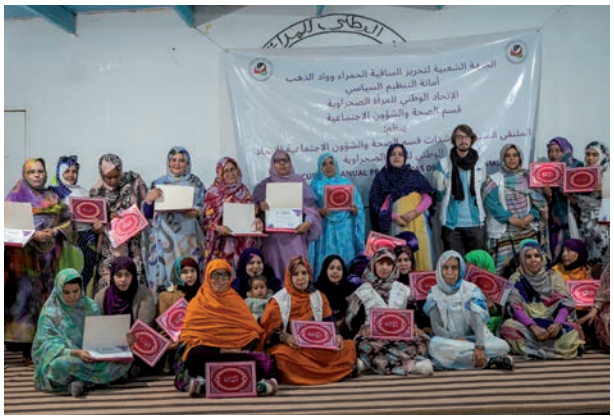
A SYSTEM ON THE EDGE OF COLLAPSE

Historically fragile yet operational, the Sahrawi health system has relied on international support and the resilience of local health workers. Since 2022, however, a 40% drop in humanitarian funding has pushed the system to the brink. This decline is not abstract—it's a daily reality. In 2025, 30% of pharmaceutical needs remain unmet. Medicines for chronic illnesses—such as diabetes, hypertension and epilepsy—are increasingly scarce. Frequent stock-outs are now the rule, not the exception.

Underfunding also gravely affects mental health. Generations born in exile are showing signs of accumulated psychological distress. Yet specialised care, trained staff and psychiatric medication remain largely unavailable. Adolescents, elderly people and women—particularly vulnerable to the pressures of exile—go untreated.

As Suad Mohamed, a midwife with Ministère de la santé publique, testifies: "We suffer from a lack of supplies and healthcare staff. There's a shortage of personnel due to the lack of adequate incentives."

> "Declarations of solidarity are not enough. Without substantial and sustained funding, humanitarian aid becomes symbolic. The Sahrawi people deserve more than symbolic gestures—they deserve dignity, protection, and a future."



Annual Meeting of Health Promoters of the National Union of Sahrawi Women. © Médicos del Mundo

With regard to healthcare personnel, the European commitment must include specific training support in order to strengthen local capacities and ensure the sustainability of the Sahrawi healthcare system.

RIGHTS DENIED BY INACTION

This is not just a health emergency; it is a direct violation of fundamental rights. When pregnant women suffer untreated anaemia, when reproductive healthcare is neglected, and when rising malnutrition among children under five goes unaddressed, we are witnessing a systemic failure—not of capacity, but of political resolve.

Since November 2023, the World Food Programme's 30% reduction in food rations has pushed tens of thousands into nutritional emergency. Anaemia, stunted growth, and weakened immunity are rising—particularly among children and lactating women—while food insecurity erodes what remains of community health resilience.

Regional hospital pharmacy. © Médicos del Mundo

FROM RHETORIC TO RESPONSIBILITY: EUROPE MUST DELIVER

In recent months, Médicos del Mundo and VOICE jointly raised these concerns before EU stakeholders[1]. The message was clear: humanitarian values must be underpinned by *real financial commitment*. The EU's credibility in principled humanitarian action is at stake.

Declarations of solidarity are not enough. Without substantial and sustained funding, humanitarian aid becomes symbolic. The Sahrawi people deserve more than symbolic gestures—they deserve dignity, protection, and a future. Western Sahara remains a Non-Self-Governing Territory under Article 73 of the UN Charter[2], underscoring the international community's obligation to defend the rights of its people.

Unless donors—particularly institutional ones—step up with flexible, long-term funding, the Sahrawi health system will continue to deteriorate. The cost of inaction will be measured in human suffering.

Médicos del Mundo Spain

Data source: Response plan for the Sahrawi refugee population 2024-2025. Authorship: Médicos del Mundo Spain | www.medicosdelmundo.org

1. See VOICE's joint advocacy with Médicos del Mundo: VOICE on LinkedIn
2. Article 73, UN Charter: On obligations towards Non-Self-Governing Territories

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

VOICE MEMBERS 2025

AUSTRIA

- CARE Österreich
- Caritas Österreich
- SOS Kinderdorf International

BELGIUM

- Caritas International Belgium
- HIAS Europe
- Médecins du Monde (MDM) Belgium
- Oxfam Solidarité - Solidariteit
- Plan Belgium

CROATIA

- International Medical Corps Croatia

CZECH REPUBLIC

- ADRA Czech Republic
- Caritas Czech Republic
- People in Need (PIN)

DENMARK

- ADRA Denmark Nødhjælp og udvikling
- CARE Denmark
- Dansk Folkehjælp Danish People' Aid
- DanChurchAid (DCA)
- Danish Refugee Council (DRC)
- Mission East Mission Øst
- Save the Children Denmark

FINLAND

- Fida International
- Finn Church Aid
- World Vision Finland

FRANCE

- Action Contre la Faim
- ACTED Agence d'Aide à la Coopération Technique et au Développement
- CARE France
- Handicap International Humanity and Inclusion
- La Chaîne de l'Espoir
- Premiere Urgence International
- Médecins du Monde (MDM) France
- Relief International
- Secours Catholique - Réseau Mondial Caritas
- Secours Islamique France
- Secours Populaire Français
- Solidarités International
- Télécoms Sans Frontières (TSF)

GERMANY

- ADRA Deutschland
- Aktion gegen den Hunger
- Arbeiter-Samariter-Bund (ASB) Deutschland
- CARE Deutschland
- Deutscher Caritasverband Caritas Germany
- Diakonie Katastrophenhilfe
- International Rescue Committee Germany
- Johanniter-Unfall-Hilfe
- Malteser International
- Medico International
- Plan International Germany
- Welthungerhilfe
- World Vision Germany

ITALY

- Caritas Italiana
- CESVI - Cooperazione e Sviluppo
- COOPI
- INTERSOS Organizzazione Umanitaria Onlus
- Jesuit Refugee Service
- Oxfam Italia
- Terre des Hommes Italy
- WeWorld

IRELAND

- Concern Worldwide
- GOAL Global
- Trócaire

LUXEMBOURG

- Caritas Luxembourg

THE NETHERLANDS

- CARE Nederland
- Cordaid
- Mercy Corps
- World Vision Netherlands
- Oxfam Novib
- Save the Children Netherlands
- The Netherlands Refugee Foundation
- War Child
- ZOA

NORWAY

- CARE Norway
- Norwegian Church Aid
- Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC)
- Save the Children – Redd Barna

POLAND

- The Polish Center For International Aid (PCPM)
- Polish Humanitarian Action (PAH)

SLOVAKIA

- Habitat for Humanity International
- People in Peril

SPAIN

- Acción Contra el Hambre
- Alianza por la Solidaridad-ActionAid
- Ayuda en Acción
- Caritas Española
- EDUCO
- Médicos del Mundo
- Oxfam Intermón

SWEDEN

- LM International (Läkarmissionen)
- PMU Interlife
- Svenska kyrkan - Church of Sweden

SWITZERLAND

- Geneva Call
- Medair

UNITED KINGDOM

- CAFOD
- Christian Aid
- Plan International UK
- Save the Children UK

93 members
18 countries

VOICE
European humanitarian NGOs. Standing together.

VOICE is the network of 93 European NGOs promoting principled and people-centred humanitarian aid. Collectively, VOICE aims to improve the quality and effectiveness of the European Union and its Member States' humanitarian aid. The network promotes the added value of NGOs as key humanitarian actors.

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