

POSITION PAPER

Shaping EU Humanitarian Leadership in a Time of Crisis

Priorities for the European Commission Communication on Humanitarian Aid

This position paper consolidates the perspectives of VOICE members on the three main pillars of the Communication: Protect, Reform, Partner. Inputs were gathered through an online survey, a VOICE workshop that brought together NGOs, DG ECHO, the Red Cross, the ICRC, and MSF, a VOICE members' webinar, and various VOICE statements.

A defining moment for EU humanitarian leadership

The forthcoming European Commission's Communication on Humanitarian Aid is being drafted against a backdrop of unprecedented and escalating humanitarian needs, shrinking humanitarian space, widespread violations of International Humanitarian Law (IHL), and growing political and financial pressures on humanitarian action.

In this context, the Communication is an essential initiative, welcomed by the VOICE network. It comes at a moment when the humanitarian sector is facing a profound funding and legitimacy crisis, and when system-wide discussions on reform are more urgent than ever. As the world's largest humanitarian donor, the EU now plays a central role in shaping how the humanitarian system evolves. The Communication is therefore a key moment to clarify how this role will be exercised, to help shape a system that is fit for purpose, works better for people affected by crises, and remains firmly anchored in humanitarian principles.

The Communication should therefore articulate how the EU will lead by example, using and improving its funding practices, partnerships, and political influence to strengthen principled humanitarian action. It should provide clear political direction on how the EU intends to adapt to financial and operational constraints without undermining quality, and work with its diverse range of partners to credibly support people affected by crises worldwide.

PART I - PROTECT

Defending humanitarian principles, space, and International Humanitarian Law

1. Reaffirm principled, needs-based humanitarian action as the foundation of EU humanitarian engagement

In many contexts, humanitarian action is increasingly challenged, politicised, or instrumentalised. The Communication must reaffirm that EU humanitarian action is guided by humanity, impartiality, neutrality, and independence, as enshrined in the [European Consensus on Humanitarian Aid](#). These humanitarian principles are not abstract values; they are operational enablers that make access, acceptance, and protection possible. The Communication should therefore set a clear political baseline: humanitarian action is guided by needs and principles, and EU leadership must be defined by its ability to defend humanitarian action from politicisation and instrumentalisation.

Commitments the Communication should include:

- A reaffirmation of the EU's commitment to humanitarian principles and the assurance that humanitarian funding remains allocated based on needs and is not politicised or instrumentalised for security, migration, or geopolitical purposes.
- The integration of systematic gender, age and disability analysis into humanitarian action, recognising that people experience crises differently and face distinct risks and barriers.
- A clear political message that protecting humanitarian space is not solely an operational concern, but a political responsibility to be upheld consistently through EU diplomacy, legislation, funding instruments, and Member States' action.
- A commitment to actively counter harmful narratives, misinformation and disinformation that undermine humanitarian action and the legitimacy of humanitarian actors.
- A commitment to increase visibility on the human impact of crises and on the positive impacts of principled humanitarian action, through public communication and political messaging.

2. Make EU humanitarian diplomacy a structured, coordinated & permanent approach

Humanitarian diplomacy is essential to protect civilians and humanitarian workers, secure access, and uphold IHL. The Communication should move humanitarian diplomacy beyond ad hoc engagement and establish it as a systematic EU function. This requires clarity on leadership, coordination, and expectations across EU actors.

Commitments the Communication should include:

- A commitment to consistent and coherent EU humanitarian diplomacy, with clear roles, responsibilities and coordination between DG ECHO, DG INTPA, the EEAS, EU Delegations, relevant Commissioners, EU Special Representatives, and Member States.
- The prevention of Humanitarian Diplomacy from being instrumentalised for any other purposes than principled humanitarian action by agreeing on a common definition and understanding (see [OCHA's definition](#)).
- A pledge that humanitarian access, the protection of civilians, and respect for IHL will be systematically integrated into EU political dialogue at global, regional, and country levels.
- A commitment to reinforce humanitarian expertise within EU institutions and Delegations, including through training and advisory capacity on IHL and humanitarian diplomacy, and by opening spaces for briefings on operational contexts and challenges by international and national NGOs in all relevant diplomatic fora.
- A commitment that EU humanitarian diplomacy is exercised both proactively and preventively, based on early warning and country-level analysis.

3. Reassert EU leadership on International Humanitarian Law and accountability

The widespread violations of IHL are one of the defining challenges of today's humanitarian landscape. The Communication must position the EU as a consistent and credible leader on IHL and the fight against impunity, including when violations occur in politically sensitive contexts. Beyond reaffirming legal commitments, EU leadership requires political consistency, public positioning, consistent implementation and support for mechanisms that document violations and promote accountability.

Commitments the Communication should include:

- A commitment to use all EU political, diplomatic, and normative tools coherently to fight impunity, hold those responsible for violations of IHL accountable, and promote compliance with IHL, while ensuring these tools do not undermine humanitarian access or principled engagement.
- A commitment to consistently and publicly condemn violations of IHL, including attacks on civilians, humanitarian personnel, health workers, and civilian infrastructures, across all crises.
- Support for international and independent mechanisms that monitor, document, and analyse IHL violations, and for the use of this evidence to inform EU political and foreign policy decisions.

4. Protect humanitarian access and humanitarian personnel, including local staff

Humanitarian access is increasingly constrained by administrative barriers, security restrictions, and legal and financial obstacles. At the same time, local humanitarian staff face disproportionate risks yet often receive less political attention and protection. The Communication should clearly prioritise access and the protection of humanitarian and health workers as key political objectives.

Commitments the Communication should include:

- A political commitment to systematically address impediments to humanitarian access through EU diplomatic engagement.
- Champion humanitarian exemptions in sanctions and counter-terrorism frameworks at global and EU level and support their implementation and practical uptake, including through guidance to banks and financial institutions to tackle bank de-risking.
- A recognition that defending humanitarian space includes the protection and enabling of local civil society.
- A clear commitment to elevate the duty of care towards local humanitarian staff as a political priority, through both adequate funding and EU public advocacy and diplomatic dialogue.

PART II - REFORM

Putting people first through quality funding, local leadership, and system reform

1. Ensure a principled and people-centred humanitarian reform

The current funding and legitimacy crisis facing the humanitarian sector has intensified calls for reform, including through the Humanitarian Reset, at a time when needs continue to rise, and resources are shrinking. In this context, reform is no longer optional. It must be guided by the imperative to save lives and protect dignity, rather than by institutional convenience or short-term cost savings. It must ensure that humanitarian responses remain inclusive, accessible and responsive to the needs of those most at risk of exclusion, including women, children, persons with disabilities, and other marginalised groups. As the world's largest humanitarian donor, the EU has a particular responsibility to help shape this reform. The Communication should therefore articulate a clear vision for a principled and people-centred humanitarian reform, using the EU's leadership and convening power to strengthen the system's ability to deliver quality, inclusive, and accountable humanitarian action.

Commitments the Communication should include:

- The championing of an inclusive, system-wide reform rooted in the humanitarian principles, informed by the experience and realities of all humanitarian actors, and grounded in local leadership.
- The safeguarding of essential sectors during prioritisation exercises, particularly those already at risk of neglect, such as Protection, Education in Emergencies, Mental Health and Psychosocial Support, Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights, Gender-Based Violence prevention and response, and disability inclusion.
- Clear recognition that accountability to affected people and participation are core components of quality humanitarian action and must be safeguarded during reprioritisation and reform processes.
- A commitment to promoting humanitarian reform that recognises and builds on the added value of a diverse humanitarian system, made up of complementary actors and funding mechanisms
- The use of the EU's convening and leadership power to enable system-wide transformations.
- The preservation and strengthening of essential system-wide services such as needs assessment, data collection, analysis and coordination, as core elements of the humanitarian system.

2. Make localisation central to the reform agenda

Localisation is not an efficiency shortcut, but a necessary shift in power, resources, and decision-making. Localisation is central to humanitarian reform, but progress depends on practical changes in how partnerships and funding are structured. The Communication, building on the DG ECHO's Equitable Partnership Guidance, should move localisation from policy commitments to action.

Commitments the Communication should include:

- A reaffirmation of localisation as a central reform objective.
- Beyond participation, a commitment to shift decision-making power and promote co-design.
- A commitment to identify simplified and graduated compliance approaches that enable local and national actors to engage meaningfully in EU-funded humanitarian action.
- A commitment to systematically assess and publicly report on localisation outcomes, moving beyond funding figures, to capture the quality of partnerships experienced by local and national actors. This should include, among others, attention to the barriers faced by Global South NGOs in accessing EU humanitarian funding and participation in decision-making processes.
- A commitment to support Global South NGOs' participation in EU policy dialogues and coordination spaces.

3. Reform funding rules to enable quality and localisation

Efficiency gains must be framed as a means to improve outcomes for affected people, not as cost-cutting exercises that undermine quality. To date, administrative and compliance complexity, fragmented funding, and duplicative requirements continue to absorb scarce resources and constrain both international and local actors. It remains a major barrier to efficiency, innovation, and equitable partnerships and has untapped potential for efficiency gains.

Commitments the Communication should include:

- Lead on a Team Europe effort to reduce duplication by harmonising key administrative and reporting requirements across EU Member States and other EU funding instruments.
- Support for the systematic use of collective and shared mechanisms, including joint procurement, common services, and outsourced functions, to reduce duplication, lower transaction costs, and strengthen collective operational capacity.
- The scaling up of NGO-led pooled funding and programmatic approaches that enable longer-term partnerships, enhance localisation, reduce project fragmentation, and support coherent responses across actors and crises.

4. Align funding with ambition: predictable, flexible, multi-year financing

Funding quantity and modalities shape behaviour across the system. Short-term, rigid, project-based funding undermines quality, preparedness, and equitable partnerships. The Communication should therefore frame quality funding as a core reform lever, not a technical adjustment.

Commitments the Communication should include:

- A commitment to expand multi-year and flexible funding, particularly in protracted crises and fragile settings.
- Political recognition that fair coverage of core, indirect, and security-related costs is essential to sustain quality humanitarian action and viable partnerships.
- A renewed commitment for the EU and its Member States to allocate 0,7% of GNI to Official Development Assistance (ODA) by 2030, including at least 10% to humanitarian action.
- The allocation of EUR 25 billion for humanitarian action in the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) as a guaranteed minimum baseline in the Global Europe Regulation, to ensure principled and predictable funding.
- Continued support in neglected crises and Education in Emergencies with dedicated funding commitments.
- The strengthening of the European Commission's solidarity leadership in the global humanitarian financing landscape, making the case that needs-based humanitarian action is essential for global peace and prosperity.

5. Strategic supply chains as a pillar of effective humanitarian action

Humanitarian supply chains are the lifeline that enables assistance to reach millions of people in need. In today's operating environment, they can no longer be treated as a purely technical or back-office function. They are a strategic component of humanitarian action, and shared approaches have demonstrated concrete gains in access, efficiency, preparedness, and collective impact across crises. DG ECHO has played a key leadership role in advancing this agenda, including through the Humanitarian Leadership Group on Supply Chain. The Communication should now translate this ambition into a clear political direction.

Commitments the Communication should include:

- A clear plan to implement the relevant commitments agreed by the Humanitarian Leadership Group on Supply Chain.
- A commitment to incentivise and support shared, coordinated, and collective supply chain approaches, including joint procurement, common services, and shared logistics.
- Explicit support for preparedness and pre-positioning, including at local and regional levels, as core humanitarian investments.
- A commitment to strengthen local and regional supply chains, aligning supply chain policy with localisation and resilience objectives.
- Lead on donors' efforts, including EU Member States, to align procurement, contracting, and funding practices with these objectives, enabling flexibility, local sourcing where appropriate, and collective approaches.

1. Reinforce DG ECHO's leadership on principled partnerships with civil society

Partnership is not only an operational modality; it is a defining feature of the EU humanitarian model. DG ECHO's partnership approach, grounded in trust, dialogue, and principled engagement with NGOs, is a key asset that should be preserved and strengthened. The Communication should clearly reaffirm DG ECHO's leadership role in shaping a partnership culture that values civil society as strategic actors, not only as implementers.

Commitments the Communication should include:

- A clear political commitment to maintain and strengthen DG ECHO's partnership-based approach to humanitarian action and to maintain the EU's commitment to diversity in partnership as enshrined in the [European Consensus on Humanitarian Aid](#).
- Recognition of NGOs – local, national, and international – as strategic partners contributing analysis, access, innovation, and accountability and substantial support to ensure their meaningful participation.
- A commitment to maintain structured and regular dialogue with civil society at headquarters and country levels, including in the design, monitoring, and review of EU humanitarian policies.

2. Promote a people-centred, locally grounded approach to fragility

A people-centred approach means recognising that each context is different and engaging affected communities in the design and implementation of programmes to ensure that tools and methodologies are adapted to their specific needs. This approach is not only a moral imperative but also a necessity for achieving long-term stability and resilience for all.

Commitments the Communication should include:

- A commitment to ensure systematic engagement with affected communities, local civil society, and informal actors in fragile and conflict-affected contexts, and to support partners in doing so.
- A recognition of essential services, social sectors, education and protection as key to addressing fragility and building resilience.
- A strong emphasis on climate and environmental risks as fragility multipliers, including support for anticipatory action, early warning, and shock-responsive approaches.
- A commitment to support gender-responsive humanitarian interventions alongside emergency action, ensuring complementarity and inclusion.
- A commitment to fund people-centred interventions that specifically link humanitarian response with long-term programming to build community-level resilience.

3. Safeguard humanitarian principles in the EU Integrated Approach to Fragility

To break the cycle of fragility, the EU and its Member States should prioritise an HDP Nexus approach for all contexts facing fragility, ensuring that immediate relief efforts are linked with long-term resilience-building and social cohesion strategies. This requires respect for humanitarian principles, protection of humanitarian access and civic space, and strong engagement of development donors in contexts with fragility.

Commitments the Communication should include:

- Recognition that the EU must maintain and deepen engagement in contexts facing fragility and that a HDP nexus approach and long-term, predictable engagement are required in fragile settings and protracted crises, including in contexts where cooperation with national authorities is limited or not possible.
- A clear understanding of the different mandates, budgets and responsibilities between DG ECHO, DG INTPA, the EEAS, and Member States within the EU Integrated Approach to Fragility.
- A political commitment to safeguard humanitarian principles in all EU engagements.

4. Strengthen coordination across EU actors and instruments

The EU's added value on fragility lies in its ability to act coherently across institutions, instruments, and Member States, while preserving the distinct role of humanitarian action.

Commitments the Communication should include:

- The strengthening of the HDP nexus through the use of programmatic tools and policy dialogue to address the most pressing challenges, as well as the definition of clear coordination mechanisms between DG ECHO, DG INTPA, the EEAS and other EU actors operating in fragile settings.
- A clear recognition of the role of EU Delegations in facilitating coordination and dialogue, while respecting humanitarian principles.
- Acknowledgement and support for the important role of civil society operating in fragile contexts across both humanitarian and resilience programming.
- A commitment to use the EU's convening power to promote coordination and coherence between the EU and Member States approaches in fragile and conflict-affected settings.
- Ensure the EU meets its commitment to fund Least Developed Countries and that prioritisation of fragile and conflict-affected settings in the Global Europe Instrument is effectively implemented across geographic programmes.

5. Engage new partners without compromising humanitarian principles

Exploring partnerships with the private sector and development finance institutions can complement humanitarian action, but only if clear safeguards are in place.

Commitments the Communication should include:

- A clear framing of partnerships with private sectors and alternative donors as complementary to, not a substitute for, principled humanitarian action.
- Political commitment to ensure that new partnerships are guided by humanitarian principles and needs-based priorities.
- Explicit recognition of the importance of safeguarding civil society space and meaningful participation in evolving partnership models.

Conclusion

The new Humanitarian Communication is a critical opportunity for the EU to reaffirm its humanitarian identity and leadership at a time of profound global uncertainty. Its impact will not only depend on the ambition of its political commitments but also on its ability to align words with action.

To be credible and effective, the forthcoming Humanitarian Communication must deliver on these three core objectives:

PROTECT. Defending principled, needs-based humanitarian action by protecting humanitarian space, upholding International Humanitarian Law consistently across all crises, and making humanitarian diplomacy a permanent and coordinated EU function.

REFORM. Engaging in the reform of the humanitarian system in a people-centred manner by aligning funding, compliance, and reform processes with quality, localisation, and accountability to affected people's objectives — rather than short-term efficiency or political gain.

PARTNER. Reinforcing DG ECHO's partnership model based on trust and principles by safeguarding civil society space, and ensuring an EU integrated approach to fragility that promotes the HDP nexus and coordination across EU Institutions and Member States while safeguarding humanitarian principles.

Other useful resources: [VOICE Policy Resolution 2025](#) - Time for Action: Humanitarian NGOs call for a bold response to fragility, [VOICE Out Loud 40](#) "Fragility: The Cost of Inaction", [VOICE Statement](#): Reforming the Humanitarian System - 5 Key Actions the EU must take, [VOICE key highlights](#): VOICE - Global Focus roundtable in Copenhagen, [VOICE Position Paper](#): Unlocking the full potential of Anticipatory Action.

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