



**VOICE**

European humanitarian NGOs.  
Standing together.

# VOICE STRATEGIC PLAN

**2024 - 2029**

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## 1. Introduction

[VOICE](#) (Voluntary Organisations in Cooperation in Emergencies) is the largest network of European non-governmental organisations that implement principled humanitarian projects and programmes in crisis contexts worldwide<sup>1</sup>.

VOICE is the primary interlocutor between European humanitarian NGOs and the European Union (EU), dedicated to fostering effective humanitarian engagement. For over 30 years since our establishment in 1992, we have advocated for a principled EU humanitarian system that is efficient and effective in meeting the needs of crisis-affected communities.

VOICE members implement a wide range of principled humanitarian responses worldwide, working with affected populations in countries affected by natural disasters, armed conflicts, and other emergencies. Most of our members have a Humanitarian Partnership certificate with DG ECHO, the Directorate for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations of the European Commission.

This document outlines VOICE's Strategic Plan for the next five years, 2024 to 2029.

## 2. The changing external environment

### 2.1. Escalating needs

Over the last decade, we have seen escalating humanitarian needs across the globe. This is due to increased armed conflicts worldwide, the devastating impact of climate change and the resulting increase in natural disasters. An unprecedented number of people are affected by humanitarian crises which are becoming more complex, recurrent, and protracted. This is a trend that we believe is set to continue in the years to come.

In 2024, OCHA's Global Humanitarian Overview ([GHO](#)) update reported that 299.4 million people were in need worldwide. It is widely recognised that humanitarian needs are increasing. [Development Initiatives](#) reports that a growing majority of people in need live in countries experiencing protracted crises. In 2022, 44 countries experiencing protracted crises accounted for 83% of the total people in need.

The scale of crises deepens existing inequalities with devastating impacts on women and girls amongst others. Armed conflicts, increased displacement, and recent health and economic crises including the COVID-19 pandemic, have particularly aggravated gender inequalities. These have compounded rates of all forms of gender-based violence and had far-reaching consequences for women, girls and LGBTQI+ people concerning their access to critical services and protection.

[Development Initiatives](#) calculated that the funding requirements increased nearly fourfold since 2013, from US\$ 13.2 billion to US\$ 52.4 billion. In [2023](#), just over one-third of the US\$ 57 billion required by the Global Humanitarian Overview was funded. Despite the drop of approximately US\$ 10 billion in the [Global Financial Appeal in 2024](#) – due to the reprioritisation of Humanitarian Response Plans - the future of funding remains bleak in the context of increasing humanitarian needs.

### 2.2. The EU's response

The EU is one of the leading humanitarian donors worldwide. In 2023, the European Commission was the third largest humanitarian donor globally, after the US and Germany, with €2.92 billion in humanitarian funding. These three donors together provided two-thirds of the global humanitarian funding. In 2023, the US alone provided [36.9%](#) of the global total and the EU, European Commission and Member States combined contributed 32.3%.

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<sup>1</sup> Please note that where this document says 'VOICE', it refers to the network as a whole: all member organisations, the Board, and the Secretariat.

The EU's total humanitarian budget for the Multiannual Financial Framework 2021 - 2027 is €11.569 billion (2021 ). This is only 12% of the EU's external action [budget](#), which totals €95.751 billion. Within EU countries, there remains strong public support for humanitarian work. The EU's [Eurobarometer](#) for 2023 found that 91% of respondents felt it was important or very important (45%) for the EU to finance humanitarian programmes. "71% say humanitarian aid is more efficient if coordinated and provided by the EU, while 23% think it is more efficient if provided by each EU Member State separately."

2024 is a year of change, marked by elections worldwide, including in [eight](#) European countries and for the European Parliament (EP). In some cases, it could put pressure on humanitarian work and disaster preparedness. It will remain critical for VOICE to maintain political support from across the political spectrum.

### 2.3. Principled humanitarian approach

The EU has committed to abide by a set of guiding principles for humanitarian action, as outlined in [Article 214 of the Lisbon Treaty](#), the 2007 [EU Consensus](#) on humanitarian aid, reconfirmed in 2017, and the 2021 [Communication from the Commission to the EP and the Council on the EU's humanitarian action: new challenges, same principles](#). These three key documents set out the commitment to ensure that humanitarian work complies with International Humanitarian Law (IHL) and the fundamental humanitarian principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality, and independence.

These fundamental humanitarian principles remain a critical yardstick for partnerships between NGOs and the EU. Nonetheless, we see that diplomatic, security or migration-oriented political narratives have driven decisions on the allocation of humanitarian funding, leading to a politicisation of funding decisions.

Restrictive measures, largely sanctions and counterterrorism measures impede principled humanitarian responses. Following the landmark United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 2664, the EU has increasingly recognised the negative impacts of sanctions on humanitarian responses. It has thereby introduced humanitarian exemptions to an increasing number of its sanctions regimes. However, there is still inadequate protection for humanitarian actors across operational contexts due to inconsistent uptake and implementation of the humanitarian safeguards enshrined in the UNSCR 2664 in EU sanctions and counterterrorism measures.

The absence of harmonisation of humanitarian safeguards aligned with UNSCR 2664, and their inconsistent implementation, across all EU sanctions and counterterrorism measures, means that there is inadequate protection for humanitarian actors across all humanitarian responses. This has led to significant complexity and legal uncertainty for both humanitarian actors and the private sector, especially banks.

### 2.4. Challenges to humanitarian space

As the global political system becomes increasingly polarised, support for impartial and neutral humanitarian work and respect for IHL is under greater pressure. Respect for IHL is critical in terms of safeguarding access to victims of crises and protecting international, national, and local humanitarian workers. Therefore, it remains essential for VOICE to advocate for the protection of humanitarian space and respect for IHL.

Attacks on humanitarian workers have increased to a frightening level over recent years. Globally, between 2018 and 2022, an estimated 623 humanitarian workers were killed, 937 were injured, and 661 were kidnapped in the line of duty as reported on Humanitarian Outcomes' [Aid Worker Security Database](#). The vast majority of these were national humanitarian workers. Sanctions, the criminalisation of humanitarian work, and violations of IHL have substantially contributed to putting humanitarian workers at risk and inhibited the implementation of humanitarian interventions in many crises.

Disinformation campaigns, the role of social media platforms and the rapidly evolving capabilities of artificial intelligence – such as the use of deepfakes and computer-generated disinformation – are likely to further complicate all aspects of humanitarian access in the coming years.

## 2.5. Sustainable solutions

Climate change is increasing the number and severity of extreme events, such as floods and droughts, compounding multiple and intersecting inequalities. Together with the rising number of armed conflicts, climate change is elevating humanitarian needs to unprecedented levels of scale, severity, and impact.

There is recognition in the humanitarian sector that concerted action is needed to respond to the urgent needs of today and to work towards resilience, enabling the capacity to anticipate, adapt and provide sustainable long-term solutions that address the root causes of climate-driven conflicts. Many multi-mandated and humanitarian NGOs are therefore taking increasing roles in nexus programming that connects humanitarian, development and sometimes peacebuilding interventions. These NGOs have invested in greater anticipatory action and resilience programming. Where possible, they promote the leadership of local actors in countries at risk of climate-induced disasters, including connecting communities and local and national actors to forecasting data and disaster management planning.

VOICE underlines that escalating needs cannot be addressed by humanitarians alone. Development actors and donors need to step in and take on a substantive part of the burden related to identifying and funding longer-term solutions for protracted crises.



## 3. The role of humanitarian NGOs in the current humanitarian context

International, national, and local NGOs play a fundamental role in humanitarian action as direct responders, funded by private and institutional donors such as DG ECHO, and as the main implementing partners of the United Nation's (UN) humanitarian programmes. VOICE is keen to ensure that NGOs remain essential partners for the implementation of European humanitarian funding. NGOs' humanitarian work is evidenced as cost-effective, responsive, and accountable to crisis-affected populations, the public, and donors.

### 3.1. Local and national organisations

Humanitarian organisations originating from countries in crisis play a critical role, as first responders and also as actors in protracted crises supporting communities over the longer term. VOICE members, whether as signatories of the [Grand Bargain](#) or through other initiatives, are committed to investing in locally led response and fairer partnerships in their humanitarian programmes. They are expanding their collaboration with national and local partners as critical stakeholders to ensure inclusion in decision-making, resourcing, and leadership.

The humanitarian sector recognises the need to address the disproportionate barriers affecting national and local actors in relation to access to funding, governance and decision making in programming, and in building greater local ownership of humanitarian response. This concerns transforming power dynamics in favour of affected communities.

As a network, VOICE will increase its investment in our collective positioning on localisation in the coming years.

### 3.2. Quality humanitarian work

Over time, operational NGOs have engaged in a range of initiatives to strengthen the quality of their operations. These include monitoring, learning and accountability initiatives, as well as investment in improved risk management, such as protection from sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment, prevention of fraud and diversion of humanitarian funding, security risk management, etc.

Humanitarian organisations have invested considerably in making humanitarian work more inclusive and equitable, increasingly integrating the diverse needs related to gender, disability, age and other important considerations. There is increasing attention to addressing structural discrimination affecting women and girls and more is being done to respect the rights and needs of children, including education in emergencies. Despite the progress that is being made, the humanitarian sector still has some way to go to ensure that the specific needs of all members of affected communities are addressed.

VOICE will continue to advocate for high-quality principled humanitarian responses, implemented in adherence with professional standards and supported by adequate funding to ensure their quality and effectiveness.

### 3.3. Increasing complexity

Over the last decade, contractual requirements and expectations from large institutional donors, such as DG ECHO, have become far more demanding. The EU has arguably become more corporate in its approach, particularly in the ways in which they wish to contractually mitigate risk. This contributes to the introduction of increasingly stringent contractual clauses and requirements for humanitarian programming.

While working in increasingly complex environments, and greater donors' requirements, VOICE will continue to promote approaches aiming for more flexibility. We will not stop calling for reduced administrative burden and adequate coverage of the rising costs associated with donors' requirements in line with the initial Grand Bargain commitments.

VOICE's new Strategic Plan comes at a time of rapid technological change, with the rise of big data and artificial intelligence. As noted earlier, these technological advancements present challenges for NGOs, but they also offer opportunities for greater efficiency and effectiveness. They might provide NGOs with new ways to connect with their target audience. To date, NGOs have only just started to capitalise upon these opportunities, but we anticipate this being an area of growth in the coming five years.



## 4. Vision & Mission

### 4.1. Vision:

Our vision is a world in which every crisis-affected community receives principled, timely, and comprehensive support tailored to their needs.

### 4.2. Mission:

We use our collective voice towards the European Union and its Member States to promote effective and principled humanitarian responses. We advocate for the continued recognition of the key role of NGOs in humanitarian action, and for adequate resources to meet the needs of those living in the most vulnerable contexts and conditions.



## 5. VOICE's Three Strategic Goals

For the coming five years, we have outlined three Strategic Goals.

### 5.1. Strategic Goal 1: Principled humanitarian response

To promote EU responses to humanitarian crises consistent with humanitarian principles and IHL.

#### Focus areas:

#### 5.1.1 Humanitarian funding is allocated based on needs and in line with humanitarian principles

VOICE will continue to advocate for principled and need-based humanitarian responses which reach the most vulnerable. Humanitarian aid decisions should prioritise principled, life-saving aid. VOICE will continue to fight against the instrumentalisation and politicisation of humanitarian programmes. VOICE will call for the EU and its Member States to embrace their role as global donors that lead by example in providing principled humanitarian funding based on needs, including in neglected crises.

#### 5.1.2 Adherence to International Humanitarian Law (IHL)

IHL is central to the operations of our members and the humanitarian sector, particularly where conflict is a significant driver. Responses to crises require systematic and full application of IHL in all crisis contexts by all actors.

VOICE will advocate for promoting and upholding IHL in the EU's response to humanitarian crises. Recognising that the EU and its Member States play a key diplomatic role globally, VOICE will encourage them to continue to use all diplomatic efforts to ensure that IHL is respected by all parties to armed conflicts.

#### 5.1.3 EU policies contribute to an enabling environment for the implementation of principled humanitarian aid

Sanctions and counter-terrorism measures are foreign and security policy tools that can cause legal, financial, reputational, and security risks for humanitarian organisations and have severe impacts on affected populations. Other consequences include bank derisking measures which can negatively affect humanitarian operations.

VOICE will promote EU and Member States' policies that safeguard humanitarian actors from the effects of sanctions regimes and counterterrorism legislation, guaranteeing access and principled aid. We will also advocate for an active role of the EU in diplomatic, financial, and other actions that promote the protection of humanitarian space and contribute to an environment in which humanitarian workers can work safely. This includes promoting humanitarian exemptions in the domestic law of host states.

### 5.2. Strategic Goal 2: EU and Member States humanitarian funding and humanitarian aid policies

To advocate for the provision of adequate quality funding for humanitarian programmes by the EU and its Member States, and for additional resources to address the underlying causes of protracted crises and the impact of climate change.

#### Focus areas:

#### 5.2.1 Adequate and quality EU funding for humanitarian aid

VOICE will continue to advocate for an increased yearly DG ECHO budget in the annual negotiations within the current Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF). We will continue to monitor DG ECHO's humanitarian budget and advocate for adequate reinforcements, including from the emergency funding instruments. We will underline the need to provide sufficient humanitarian funding without reducing long-term funding for development.

Ahead of the new MFF starting in 2028, we will seek to influence the process leading to the next MFF, advocating for a sufficient budget for humanitarian aid for the following seven years. Ensuring broad political support across the political spectrum for humanitarian aid is critical for retaining adequate funding in the years to come.

VOICE will engage with DG ECHO and other relevant EU stakeholders, including Member States, to encourage adherence to the Good Humanitarian Donorship (GHD) Initiative, to which the EU is a signatory. As such, we will advocate for improved quality funding, greater flexibility and predictability, reductions in administrative burden, greater access to multi-year funding, and reducing further conditionalities.

### 5.2.2 Additional resources to address the underlying causes of protracted crises and to build climate resilience

Humanitarian crises are becoming more complex, recurrent, and protracted. As such, humanitarian aid alone cannot be the solution. VOICE's Resilience-Nexus Working Group will continue to seek to call on the EU and its Member States to allocate additional resources to prepare for, prevent, and adapt to crises. We continue to call for a multi-sectoral approach within the implementation of the Humanitarian-Development-Peace (HDP) nexus while respecting humanitarian principles and the different mandates of each actor to avoid the risk of any instrumentalisation of humanitarian aid.

VOICE will advocate to the Member States and the EU - notably DG INTPA and EEAS - for greater prioritisation of funding for protracted and neglected crises. We will ask to scale-up of climate finance and funding for anticipatory action, especially in fragile contexts. We call for greater coordination between DG ECHO, DG INTPA, EEAS and among Member States to address the HDP nexus.

### 5.2.3 Improved quality and coherence of EU and Member States' humanitarian policies

We will mobilise collective advocacy on priority humanitarian policy areas to influence EU and Member States' policies and funding decisions. VOICE will advocate for improved donor coordination and harmonisation amongst European donors to improve efficiency and impact in line with the Grand Bargain commitments.

We will prioritise advocating for quality funding and improved aid policies in the priority areas of this Strategic Plan, including the HDP nexus, anticipatory action, localisation, including support for local women-led-organisations, and good humanitarian donorship, as well as integration of a strong gender focus across these areas.

Building on the expertise of its [membership](#) in 19 European countries, VOICE will continue to facilitate exchanges between members and mobilise advocacy activities at the national level to influence Member States' positions in our priority areas in key European forums. In doing so, we will continue to work closely with a selection of peer networks in Member States. We will also continue to work with the rotating EU Presidencies and influence selected Member States on specific focus areas where a Member States' position can potentially break the deadlock in key negotiations at the EU level.

## 5.3. Strategic Goal 3: The role of humanitarian NGOs

To strengthen the role of NGOs in the implementation of EU humanitarian programmes.

### Focus areas:

#### 5.3.1 Maintain a strong collaborative partnership with the EU and its Member States

Building on its longstanding relationship with DG ECHO, VOICE will continue to lead the Humanitarian Partnership (HP) Watch Group including its Task Force. This is a key dialogue platform between DG ECHO and its certified NGO partners.

VOICE will continue to strengthen the role of the HP Watch Group to enhance the quality, efficiency, and effectiveness of the partnership between NGOs and DG ECHO. This will be key to ensuring space for timely dialogue at the right level.



We will keep advocating for the added value of NGOs and their participation in key humanitarian debates and policies at European and Member States levels. We will continue our dialogue with DG ECHO, the Commissioner, the EP, and the Standing Rapporteur for Humanitarian Aid, as well as with the Council Working Party on Humanitarian Aid and Food Aid (COHAFA), the Working Party for Foreign Relations Counsellors (RELEX), and the DEVE and BUDG committees, among others.

### 5.3.2 Engage members and EU stakeholders in a coordinated approach to local leadership in line with the Grand Bargain commitments

VOICE will work on a common understanding of locally-led responses and modalities for quality partnerships. We will advocate towards EU decision-makers for necessary investments in localised response, local leadership, and the capacity of local responders which include women-led organisations. This includes advocating for support to the role of DG ECHO partners where they are intermediaries in partnerships with local and national responders. This priority will be integrated into other thematic areas of VOICE's work, including climate, anticipatory action, working across the HDP nexus, and quality funding.

To do so will involve convening more frequent dialogue with local actors, e.g. local networks, and the EU to be responsive to national NGOs' priorities for addressing barriers to successful localisation. This includes addressing multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination and marginalisation. We will facilitate a space for further mutual learning among the membership on locally-led responses and implementing quality partnerships.

We will continue to safeguard the role of international intermediaries and their in-country partners by ensuring that donor expectations are realistic and supportive, while holding the EU and Member States accountable to their localisation commitments. Intermediaries, such as international NGOs, often play a key role in mitigating risks when funding national NGOs. We will continue to call for a fairer sharing of risks.

### 5.3.3 Appropriate proportion of humanitarian funding is spent through a diversity of NGOs

VOICE will advocate for an appropriate proportion of EU humanitarian funding to be spent through a diverse range of NGOs in recognition of their agile and cost-effective role in responses to humanitarian crises. Throughout our engagement with the EU, VOICE will continue to promote the diversity of humanitarian actors and their respective complementary roles.

In many humanitarian responses, there is a large donor focus on the role of the UN, notwithstanding the fact that NGOs are often the implementers for many UN-funded programmes. We will continue to highlight the important role NGOs have in the implementation of humanitarian work with the aim of safeguarding space and funding. NGOs bring a unique level of flexibility, timeliness, effectiveness, accountability, efficiency, and technical expertise to humanitarian responses.

We will also accentuate the unique diversity within the European humanitarian NGO community, from small to large NGOs, their varied geographic origin, and diverse technical focus, presence, and capabilities. Last, but certainly not least, we will increasingly showcase the critical role national organisations have in humanitarian response.

## 6. Three Enabling Actions

The level of ambition expressed through the three Strategic Goals can only be partially delivered with the current bandwidth of VOICE and its Secretariat. To meet these ambitions, VOICE will aim to evolve, grow, and expand its capacity, based on the following three Enabling Actions:

### 6.1. Enabling Action 1: To grow and engage the VOICE membership

Growing our membership will be key to maintaining our role as a credible and influential network of humanitarian NGOs in the EU. It is important that we can represent NGOs from across Europe. It helps us to engage effectively with EU Presidencies from any part of the Union and maintain our relevance vis-à-vis an expanding EU. Engaging new members from countries where there has been less humanitarian work can help propagate a culture of principled humanitarian action in different parts of Europe.

We will remain a highly agile network in which members are actively engaged through our working groups, the Humanitarian Partnership Watch Group including its Task Force, the Resilience-Nexus-Working Group, informal working groups, the annual General Assembly, and all other webinars, meetings, events, and activities, etc. of the network.

VOICE will continue investing in our strong and effective internal and external communication approach. We will remain mindful of the diversity amongst our membership, by providing a variety of engagement opportunities and communication channels. We will engage members in sharing evidence on key topics about EU policy and funding to enable VOICE to speak with authority on these topics. We will continue our exchanges on humanitarian crises, challenges, and policies through our members only exchanges under Chatham House rules to provide a platform for exchange, learning and networking.

### 6.2. Enabling Action 2: To ensure a sustainable resource base for VOICE and its Secretariat

We aim to broaden and enhance our resource base to adequately support our growing ambitions as outlined in the three Strategic Goals.

This entails increasing our funding and diversifying its sources. Our Strategic Plan includes seeking financial support from EU Member States in various forms, such as project-specific funding, longer-term thematic contributions, or more comprehensive organisational support.

We will explore new financial avenues, including partnerships with the private sector and foundations. This approach aims to establish a more robust and sustainable financial foundation for VOICE over the coming five years.

### 6.3. Enabling Action 3: To deepen engagement with external stakeholders

VOICE will continue to engage with EU stakeholders outside of DG ECHO. This will include engagement with DG INTPA on issues of underlying causes of protracted crises, the HDP nexus, fragile states, and climate by joining forces with other networks, such as CONCORD and EPLO.

We will focus on broadening our outreach to the EP, its committees such as DEVE and BUDG, etc. as well as EEAS, FPI, DG NEAR and others. Furthermore, we will continue to reach out to DG Budget, and other parts of the Commission, as well as relevant Council working parties. We will expand our outreach to EU Member States by coordinating Brussels' and Member States' level advocacy and strengthen our collaboration with selected networks in Member States and beyond.

VOICE will pay special attention to talking to relevant stakeholders outside of the humanitarian sector from all parts of the world, including women-led organisations. We will continue to invest in strategic collaborations with other NGO networks in the Member States and beyond to leverage influence by working together.

We will invest in our outreach to national organisations working in countries affected by humanitarian crises. This will include networking, engagement through our membership, and creating space for discussions with national organisations, their networks as well as women-led organisations.

## 7. Monitoring, evaluation, accountability, and learning

VOICE uses annual work plans to operationalise the Strategic Goals and focus areas, developing specific activities for each. These will be used to track progress against the Strategic Plan.

VOICE will conduct a mid-term strategy review of the overall progress, to assess changes in the external and internal context, and compile learning from the first years of implementing the strategy. VOICE will choose to do this earlier or later if the context demands, for instance, if there is a landmark shift in EU policy under the new Commission.

### VOICE STRATEGIC PLAN 2024-2029

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