
The future of European humanitarian aid

-the NGO view-

VOICE - July 1999

Introduction

Key decisions on humanitarian aid will be taken by the European Union institutions later this year. NGOs are responsible for spending three quarters of the Union's humanitarian aid budget and therefore have an important stake in these decisions. The future of European humanitarian aid is a document prepared by VOICE, following a long and broad consultation process that has seen more than 150 organisations and individuals involved. The process began in October 1998 and finished in June 1999. Fifteen meetings, including the 1998 Voice Forum, have been dedicated to identifying those issues and proposals which gather the widest consensus among NGOs. In this sense, the document may be considered as virtually unanimously endorsed by ECHO partners and reflects the common views of European NGOs on the subject. The document has been signed by VOICE and the Liaison Committee on behalf of their member organisations. The paper wishes to contribute to the elaboration of new working plans for the European humanitarian aid by ECHO and the European Commission. This exercise is now even more important now that the new Commissioner for humanitarian and development aid has been appointed.

NGOs want to draw the attention of decision-makers to the concerns of those who will be implementing these decisions in the field. NGOs understand and fully respect the concern of the Institutions to improve financial management procedures and practices within the Union. However, the need for speedy decision making in humanitarian aid must be recognised. Therefore, these proposals are aimed at making ECHO's procedures more open and transparent, as well as more rapid.

The paper has been sent to the new European Commission, the Humanitarian Aid Committee members, ECHO, the SCR, the DGVIII, DG1B, the Finnish Presidency, the European Parliament and the permanent representations of Member States to the European Union. It has also been circulated among other international organisations (Amnesty International, APRODEV, CIDSE, Eurodad, Euronaid, Eurostep, FIDH, Groupe URD, Human Rights Watch, ICRC, ICVA, Interaction, IFRC, MSF, OCHA, OMCT, Open Society Institute, SOLIDAR, UNHCR, UNICEF and WFP) as well as among academic institutions.

We hope this document will represent a positive input and will lead to an open dialogue with the European institutions on the proposals therein discussed.

General Principles

European humanitarian aid must be provided to those in greatest need on a non-discriminatory basis and without regard to political considerations. It must not be subject to political conditionality. European humanitarian aid must remain independent from the Common Foreign and Security Policy, which should however be committed to the continued provision of humanitarian assistance without political strings attached.

European humanitarian aid must be defined broadly, including continuing aid for chronic crises, rehabilitation, disaster preparedness, and capacity building as well as relief activities, and should seek to contribute towards sustainable solutions.

European humanitarian aid must be open, transparent, coherent and well co-ordinated at all levels within the Commission and with other donors of humanitarian aid.

The safety of field workers must be borne in mind at all times by all the Institutions of the Union. The Commission should co-operate closely with NGOs on all issues affecting the security of field operations and should allocate more resources to enhance security.

Particular attention should be given to ensuring that the needs of the most vulnerable are given priority. Co-operation with Southern NGOs and the involvement of beneficiaries in the management of field activities including distribution systems should be actively encouraged.

Institutional Issues

ECHO has proved its worth and should be retained as a separate administrative unit within the Commission with no less autonomy in decision making than it currently enjoys.

It must however be more open and transparent in its procedures and decision-making and be more accountable.

In this connection, an enhanced role should be given to the European Parliament

The agenda, proceedings, and decisions of the Humanitarian Aid Committee should be made public in good time.

ECHO's mandate and scope

The objectives for European humanitarian aid set out in Articles 1 and 2 of the Council Regulation on humanitarian aid and attached to this paper at appendix 1 remain valid.

ECHO must invest more in chronic crises and in disaster prevention and preparedness. Humanitarian aid programmes and rehabilitation projects in areas where disasters are likely to recur should include prevention and preparedness elements. These elements should also be integrated into development programmes for such areas. ECHO should also give increased priority to encouraging capacity building in vulnerable countries since well trained and equipped local organisations and networks can do much to prevent or mitigate humanitarian crises.

ECHO should seek to ensure that a gender sensitive approach is taken to all its work and to all the programmes it supports. The special needs of particular groups, such as children or older people, should receive specific attention.

ECHO should advocate respect for and the implementation of international humanitarian and human rights law, including the refugee Conventions, in order to safeguard humanitarian space and ensure access to victims. It should also support activities aimed at preventing human rights violations. It should however, as a guiding principle, avoid public denunciation of specific human rights violations since this inevitably causes problems for those organisations it supports in the field.

ECHO should encourage co-operation and exchanges of information with human rights organisations. It should not however directly fund such organisations. This should remain the responsibility of other Directorates-General, which should give higher priority to the development and implementation of human rights policy within the Commission.

ECHO's approach towards the question of visibility must be reviewed. It is recognised that the need to strengthen the EU image in humanitarian aid was one of the motives which lay behind the establishment of ECHO. But activities in this area have often failed to make the desired impact and have sometimes even been counterproductive. The aim of all such activities must be to raise awareness of the problems and the European contribution to their solution, within the Union and in those countries in which humanitarian programmes are implemented. ECHO must develop a coherent strategy which NGOs can then help to implement where appropriate and possible. The focus must be on the achievements of field operations rather than on ECHO itself. A special budget line should be created to fund public awareness activities.

Coherence and Co-ordination

ECHO must work more closely with the authorities and the relevant local organisations in areas receiving humanitarian aid, the appropriate UN bodies, and all other donors, governmental and non governmental, bilateral and multilateral, to ensure that European humanitarian aid forms part of a coherent overall humanitarian aid effort. Increased support should be given to NGO activities aimed at improving coherence.

ECHO must also give greater priority to co-ordination within ECHO and with other parts of the Commission to ensure that there is the greatest possible coherence between disaster preparedness, relief, rehabilitation and development aid activities. This needs to operate at different levels and involve all the various units within the Commission with responsibilities in these areas as well as with the Member States and other donors including the UN system.

The Commission must recognise the need to improve coordination between Brussels based and field units. It should introduce revised procedures and practises to ensure that this is done and clarify the respective areas of responsibility.

Particular attention must be paid to ensuring that there is a smooth transition from the supply of emergency food aid to activities aimed at strengthening food security in the longer term, including when appropriate the provision of further non-emergency food aid. In this connection administrative barriers to the procurement of food from other developing countries or locally, where this can be shown to provide clear benefits for the population in need, must be lifted.

NGO networks, including VOICE, recognise the need for increased co-ordination amongst NGOs as well as within the Commission and will continue to arrange activities with this aim. This will require the active support of ECHO and other Commission units (including DGVIII, DG1A, DG1B and SCR) for such activities.

Strengthening the Partnership between ECHO and the NGO Community

Relations between humanitarian aid NGOs and ECHO should be based on mutual trust, confidence and respect.

The new Framework Partnership Agreement introduced from the beginning of 1999 is welcomed. This must however be seen as the start of an on going process to strengthen this idea of a partnership. It must be given the chance to prove its worth. An improved process of mutual consultation will be essential to its success.

There must be increased openness and transparency within ECHO's decision making processes. Timely information on availability of funds, procedures, criteria and field management responsibilities must be generally available to interested parties without restriction.

A joint planning process should evolve in which ECHO would set a broad policy framework following systematic consultation with NGOs. Operational partners would then be responsible for translating this policy into effective field activities.

ECHO should seek to ensure that it has good access to the best technical advice. The constitution of independent advisory groups may be appropriate in some cases. Such groups should not however define their own priorities or define programmes for implementation by NGO partners.

It is recognised that all this will call for increased professionalism on the part of NGOs. VOICE will continue to play an active role in collaborative efforts within the international NGO community aimed at improving the quality and effectiveness of humanitarian aid. ECHO and other Commission units should actively support these activities.

Financial Procedures

These must be as simple as possible with the emphasis being on ex-post checks that funds were used properly rather than on prior detailed administrative and financial controls. ECHO must ensure that initial consideration of NGO proposals and subsequent negotiation of agreements and release of funds are carried out as speedily as possible and without undue delay.

Instead of the present number of operational budget lines there should be only two: an Emergency Fund and a Humanitarian Aid Budget. These should be sufficiently large to meet what experience shows to be the normal level of expenditure on humanitarian aid. Additional reserve provision should also be made to cover unexpected needs.

The Emergency Fund should be used at the sole discretion of ECHO without the need to consult the Humanitarian Aid Committee. Procedures for its use should allow for a quick response and maximum flexibility.

The Humanitarian Aid Budget should cover the needs of chronic crises, rehabilitation, disaster preparedness, and local capacity building. It should ensure continuity, covering implementation periods of at least twelve months where necessary.

Each project financed from the Humanitarian Aid Budget should include a core element for planned activities and a contingency element to meet unexpected needs. Funds should be released from this within two weeks. Replenishment of the contingency element should be possible.

ECHO must recognise that administrative costs are a structural component of each project budget, and should meet its full share of these.

Small Projects

Small projects are important in humanitarian aid since these enable small groups of beneficiaries to be reached who might otherwise be left out of large scale operations. The continued acceptance in principle of these projects is therefore important both for the NGOs submitting them and for the overall credibility of European humanitarian aid. However it is recognised that large numbers of small projects applications pose particular problems for ECHO, given administrative constraints.

The Commission's case for strengthening staff numbers is fully justified and strongly supported.

ECHO is urged to commit itself publicly to continuing its support for small projects and to enter into urgent discussions with NGOs as to how this might best be done. In this connection some of the ideas set out in preceding paragraphs on financing and on strengthening the partnership between ECHO and the NGOs are relevant.

Conclusion

We urge ECHO and the European institutions to recognise the challenges outlined in this document and start discussing these with NGOs. We look forward to a productive dialogue. In this way, the strength of our partnership will be demonstrated and the efficiency and effectiveness of European humanitarian aid increased.

Brussels, July 1999

ANNEX 1: Articles 1 and 2 of the Council Regulation on humanitarian aid (Chapter I)

Article 1

The Community's humanitarian aid shall comprise assistance, relief and protection operations on a non discriminatory basis to help people in third countries, particularly the most vulnerable among them, and as a priority those in developing countries, victims of natural disasters, man-made crises, such as wars and outbreaks of fighting, or exceptional situations or circumstances comparable to natural or man-made disasters. It shall do so for the time needed to meet the humanitarian requirements resulting from these different situations.

Such aid shall also comprise operations to prepare for risks or prevent disasters or comparable circumstances.

Article 2

The principal objectives of the humanitarian aid operations referred to in Article 1 shall be:

1. to save and preserve life during emergencies and their immediate aftermath and natural disasters that have entailed major loss of life, physical, psychological or social suffering or material damage;
2. to provide the necessary assistance and relief to people affected by longer-lasting

crises arising, in particular, from outbreaks of fighting or wars, producing the same effects as those described in subparagraph (a), especially where their own governments prove unable to help or there is a vacuum of power;

3. to help finance the transport of aid and efforts to ensure that it is accessible to those for whom it is intended, by all logistical means available, and by protecting humanitarian goods and personnel, but excluding operations with defence implications;
 4. to carry out short-term rehabilitation and reconstruction work, especially on infrastructure and equipment, in close association with local structures, with a view to facilitating the arrival of relief, preventing the impact of the crisis from worsening and starting to help those affected regain a minimum level of self-sufficiency, taking long-term development objectives into account where possible;
 5. to cope with the consequences of population movements (refugees, displaced people and returnees) caused by natural and man-made disasters and carry out schemes to assist repatriation to the country of origin and resettlement there when the conditions laid down in current international agreements in place;
 6. to ensure preparedness for risks of natural disasters or comparable exceptional circumstances and use a suitable rapid early-warning and intervention system;
 7. to support civil operations to protect the victims of fighting or comparable emergencies, in accordance with current international agreements.
-