

# CIFE Policy Paper n° 27

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## Revisiting European humanitarian aid: From noble intentions to implementation difficulties

### The European humanitarian undertaking in the context of a staggering European project

No matter which aspect of European integration one would like to refer to nowadays, it is most likely crisis prone: The European Union has recently undergone - and is still undergoing - a deep economic and financial crisis. Furthermore, it is confronted with serious attempts to question European values originating from new and old member states alike. Fierce bargaining and utilitarian politics have now replaced<sup>1</sup> old win-win perspectives on European integration.

The most recent episode illustrating a divided and standstill Europe was this year's refugee crisis. While the European Union is considered to be an important player in the international disaster relief regime, many observers stated it did comparatively little to alleviate the suffering in the Syrian refugee crisis.<sup>2</sup> At first sight, even EU documents seem to confirm this criticism, so does the Humanitarian Implementation Plan on the Syria Crisis where "dire financial constraints"<sup>3</sup> for the EU's humanitarian aid work and its difficulties for conducting a "whole-of-Syria"<sup>4</sup> needs analysis are mentioned. But the external criticism relates to various aspects of the EU's activities concerning the Syrian refugee crisis at a time, hence, it is crucial to have a more detailed look in order to avoid a glossing over different EU actors and policies. Furthermore, the usual media focus on member states' bickering turns a blind eye to the silence of most successful humanitarian assistance where needs assessment analysis is conducted far away from public attention.

This Policy Paper aims at assessing the EU's recent role as an actor in the international humanitarian relief regime, mainly focussing on internal and external challenges and the EU's way of coping with them. An analysis of the EU's role as a humanitarian assistance provider is a topical and interesting undertaking for several reasons. The question of performance is particularly interesting because it is an area where input legitimacy is of minor importance and at the same time, it would be too superfi-

cial to analyse its effectiveness on the basis of general media reports. What is more, humanitarian assistance as a policy seems to be at the very heart of the idea of a normative power Europe and some authors now claim that recent events belie a true European commitment. Precisely for this reason, authors see the pressure for the EU to act and display leadership.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, the performance question has gained importance in the field of humanitarian assistance: Good intentions are no longer enough. Last but not least, it might be surprising given the circumstances, but some positive signs or improvements have recently come to the surface when it comes to the EU's performance in this area, bucking the trend of a rather negative view on European policies. The assessment of the EU's role has two parts: Firstly, there is a focus on the EU's approach to humanitarian assistance concerning its content and its definition as well as its historical evolution.<sup>6</sup> Secondly, a look on two recent EU efforts to deal with humanitarian crises will result in a juxtaposition of rhetorical commitment and practice.

### The way from a broad approach to a narrow one

Struggling to deliver a comprehensive and adequate response to the humanitarian crisis in Iraq after the first Gulf War and the conflict in former Yugoslavia in the beginning of the 1990s, EU member states realized the need for change. They created a body responsible for the management of European humanitarian aid, the European Commission Humanitarian Aid Office ECHO<sup>7</sup>, in order to enhance its effectiveness and its credibility.<sup>8</sup> In addition to this rather pragmatic motivation, symbolic politics and its potential to strengthen the EU's image as a soft power did play their part, too.<sup>9</sup>

Humanitarian aid comprised all relief aid delivered to victims of natural disasters or armed conflict outside the EU. Throughout the 1990s, the EU's interpretation of relief aid was quite broad and included not only emergency relief aid such as medical care, food and shelter, but also the rebuilding of infrastructure, financing social integration projects, water and sanitation operations as well as disaster

preparedness and prevention.<sup>10</sup> These early activities displayed a development component with several dimensions such as for example the Commission Communication on Linking Relief, Rehabilitation and Development from 2001. Finally, some authors state that the very broad approach originated from an effort to compensate for the absence of a real common foreign and security policy.<sup>11</sup> Keeping this in mind, it is of no surprise that the 1990s EU humanitarian aid was often considered to be too biased. Authors often refer to the Kosovo conflict in 1999 or Afghanistan in 2002.<sup>12</sup> In 1999 and 2000, ECHO underwent an internal evaluation that triggered an important shift towards a strengthened commitment to needs-based humanitarian aid. According to the needs approach, countries or regions most in need of assistance are identified based on national indicators that take into account the situational context. The global needs assessment consists of a vulnerability and crisis index, these two indexes indicate the EU's priority for the delivery of humanitarian aid.<sup>13</sup> What is more, there is an index for forgotten emergencies which are defined as a situation where humanitarian needs largely exceed funding and hardly any other international donors are contributing. With these new selection criteria in place since the early 2000s, ECHO started a narrow interpretation of humanitarian aid, focusing on primary emergency aid with strict standards for financial and administrative procedures for those NGOs it works with in Framework Partnership Agreements. With this new more clear-cut approach, the European Commission earned recognition as a well performing humanitarian aid provider. For example, according to DARA – an independent non-profit organisation that specializes in evaluating humanitarian donor's performance with the Humanitarian Response Index – the European Commission scores well.<sup>14</sup>

This approach is made more visible with the European Consensus on Humanitarian Aid from 2007. The Consensus, signed by member states, the European Commission, the Council and the European Parliament in December 2007, is the first comprehensive EU document on European humanitarian aid.<sup>15</sup> The European Commission and the European Parliament aimed at enhancing member states' as well as external actors' awareness of a specific European understanding of humanitarian aid and strengthening member states' commitment to it. The Consensus reinforces the commitment to impartiality, neutrality, independence and humanity and it talks about how to implement this vision into practice. It also states that under no circumstances should humani-

tarian aid be considered as a crisis management tool. Before the Lisbon Treaty, there was no official treaty basis for a common European policy on humanitarian aid. Money spent for humanitarian aid came from the European Development Fund, the EU budget and the Emergency Aid Reserve. In the 1990s, the EU spent between 0.6 and 0.8 billion Euros on average per year for humanitarian aid.<sup>16</sup> The numbers have risen significantly in recent years despite the European economic and financial crisis. For the year 2014, ECHO indicates 1.273 billion Euro spent on humanitarian aid.<sup>17</sup>

Article 214 of the Lisbon Treaty lays the groundwork for EU humanitarian aid. It highlights the independent status of humanitarian assistance as a European autonomous external policy. European relief work is therefore to be located far away from any political, economic or military issues. Its independent status is obvious in the maintenance of ECHO's responsibility for humanitarian assistance. Nevertheless there are some doubts about its independent status because of the EEA's eventual role<sup>18</sup> and the "Comprehensive Approach".<sup>19</sup> The latter concerns a European Commission and EEA effort to array all policy fields in order to improve the EU's crisis management. Up to now, many NGOs remain highly sceptical about it because they think the risk of compromising the humanitarian principles is high.<sup>20</sup>

The most recent issues concerning humanitarian aid are the debate about resilience and the children for peace initiative. Resilience means "the ability of an individual, a household, a community, a country or a region to withstand, to adapt, and to quickly recover from stresses and shocks".<sup>21</sup> The EU Commissioner for Humanitarian Aid and Crisis Management, Christos Stylianides, gave it a prominent standing in his hearing in the European Parliament in October 2014.<sup>22</sup> The NGO community has misgivings about the resilience concept, claiming it undermines the needs-based approach of humanitarian aid.<sup>23</sup> Despite its rather narrow definition of humanitarian aid, the European Union set a new priority in its humanitarian aid work with the children for peace initiative that started in 2012. It funds NGO and UN projects aiming at providing education to children in conflict zones or children who have fled conflict zones.

### **Recent European humanitarian aid efforts: the Ebola crisis in West Africa and the Syrian crisis**

The Ebola outbreak in Guinea, Sierra Leone and Liberia in 2014 represented a particular challenge for

humanitarian assistance because of its extensive demand for humanitarian aid and civil protection measures at a time. ECHO provided funds for medical and emergency supplies. According to an ECHO fact sheet, the EU spent 1.8 billion in 2014 and 2015 for humanitarian aid in the Ebola crisis.<sup>24</sup> For the time period January-July 2015, in its donors' profile data base, the OCHA Financial Tracking Service indicates 0.997180 billion of funding originating from the European Commission.<sup>25</sup> It also funded a medical research programme dealing with vaccine treatment, diagnostic tests and treatment.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, it sent humanitarian experts for monitoring and liaising with local authorities to the region. In comparison with other international humanitarian aid donors such as the US, the European Union reacted relatively quickly to respond to the crisis.<sup>27</sup> For a very long time, MSF (Médecins Sans Frontières) was the only organization lobbying for more global attention to the seriousness of the crisis.<sup>28</sup> ECHO allocated extra financing to MSF.<sup>29</sup> The European Parliament adopted several resolutions complaining about the international response and asking for a quicker and more solid European response.<sup>30</sup> Alongside traditional ECHO aid, the Civil Protection Mechanism was activated. It provided for a better coordination of all civil protection measures related to the fight against Ebola in the West African region. In September 2014, the European Response Coordination Center (ERCC), the Commission's operational arm for Civil Protection, played an important role in setting up an international evacuation mechanism for professional health personnel to specialized European hospitals.<sup>31</sup>

When it comes to the Syrian refugee crisis, one has to distinguish between two different areas: First of all, humanitarian aid delivered to victims in Syria or neighbouring countries outside the European Union. And secondly, humanitarian aid and the treatment of refugees once they have reached a EU member state. ECHO tasks are mainly about the former, but a member state that needs help because of the increased flow of refugees in its country can ask for other member states' assistance in the framework of the civil protection mechanism. Therefore, this section will deliberately exclude the more controversial part, the one about the EU's treatment of Syrian refugees having entered the European Union.

In June 2013, the High Representative and the European Commission declared a comprehensive EU approach to the Syrian crisis. This comprised different topics such as humanitarian and a European contribution to a political solution of the conflict.<sup>32</sup>

According to a November 2015 factsheet, the European Commission has spent 4.4 billion euros on humanitarian aid for refugees in Syria and in its neighbouring countries.<sup>33</sup> Almost half of the money was spent on emergency relief aid for victims in Syria, including medical aid, the provision of food, child protection programmes, WASH (Water, Sanitation, Hygiene) and vaccination programmes for children. Based on a comprehensive needs assessment, the EU reinforced its assistance in Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey. In the framework of the Children for Peace initiative, it provided 7000 Syrian refugee children in Turkey with education programmes.<sup>34</sup> Nevertheless many say that help for these countries came too late and was not sufficient. In particular, this is the case for Turkey.<sup>35</sup> It is said to have spent 7.6 billion US dollar on humanitarian assistance for Syrian refugees since 2011.<sup>36</sup> In October 2015, the EU announced its willingness to step up its assistance for Turkey. Funds for humanitarian aid in Turkey included provisions from the Pre-Accession Instrument.

Previously mentioned criticism on the EU's humanitarian aid concerning Syria (footnote 2) that relates to humanitarian aid in Syria or its neighbourhood, argue that the EU is far from doing a good job in helping those countries neighbouring Syria facing the challenge of taking care of a very high amount of refugees.<sup>37</sup> In December 2014, the EU created the Madad Fund, also called The Regional Trust Fund in response to the Syrian crisis, that is aimed at helping Syria's direct neighbourhood to improve the living conditions for refugees. Its nature is unique in so far as it is more flexible than the standard grant application procedures NGOs have to go through if they want to become an ECHO partner and receive ECHO funds.<sup>38</sup> For the time being, the Madad Fund comprises 350 million euros originating from the EU budget as well as from member states.<sup>39</sup>

## Conclusion

So far, the EU's humanitarian assistance for Syrian refugees in Syria and Syria's neighbouring countries can be described as quite slow and underperforming with a late rise in awareness by the end of 2014. In particular, the reluctance to help Turkey before 2015 is striking. While 2015 stands for a more serious and more solid, truly needs based assessment for humanitarian aid to Syrian refugees in Syria's neighbouring countries, the comprehensive approach obviously questions a truly independent humanitarian aid that is solely based on humanitarian principles. It is obvious that the EU's activities do not live

up to the Consensus' vision of humanitarian aid. Nevertheless there is a positive development with the Madad Fund that shows that ECHO is capable to adapt and to deliver humanitarian aid corresponding to the particular needs of the region.

The Ebola crisis is also representative for a slow start for European humanitarian aid with the exception of the extra money for MSF in March 2014. But later on, it is thanks to EU's meticulous needs assessment that an international evacuation system for international health personnel was established. This role could be played because of earlier internal reforms towards a more integrated approach of humanitarian aid and civil protection issues.

The Consensus was widely appreciated for its content. Therefore, it is unfortunate that new concepts such as resilience and the comprehensive approach blur this straightforward approach from the early 2000s and shed doubts on its coherence. The EU's key documents about its commitment to humanitarian aid mainly mirror the principles and norms once can find in the international disaster management regime.<sup>40</sup> To describe the EU as a "norm shaper" in this regime seems too daring, particularly because of its time span for reaction.<sup>41</sup> A "norm follower" for most of the time would definitely be the best matching categorization. Nevertheless, at some points, it might be adequate, for example in the case of the children for peace initiative.<sup>42</sup>

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- 2 Andreas Liljeheden (2014), Refugee Crisis Divides EU Countries, 24 September 2015, <http://euranetplus-inside.eu/refugee-crisis-divide-eu-countries/> (last access December 2015). Nando Sigona writes: "Less wealthy countries are doing much more than the EU's member states to provide shelter and protection to refugees fleeing persecution in places like Syria, and previously Libya." Nando Sigona (2015), The death of migrants in the Mediterranean is a truly 'European' tragedy, <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/eurompblog/2013/10/14/the-death-of-migrants-in-the-mediterranean-is-a-truly-european-tragedy/>, (last access 21 December 2015).
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4 ECHO (2014), Humanitarian Implementation Plan Syria Crisis, *ibid.*

5 Nando Sigona, *op.cit.*

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8 Versluys underlines that humanitarian aid was part of the European Communities' activities since the Yaounde II Convention in 1969. Nevertheless, up until 1992, there was no single entity in charge for humanitarian aid. Helen Versluys (2008), European Union Humanitarian Aid: Lifesaver or Political Tool?, in: Jan Orbie: Europe's Global Role. External Policies of the European Union, Farnham: ashgate, p. 91.

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10 Versluys, *ibid.*, p. 102.

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Concerning Afghanistan, Khaliq describes a worsening of the humanitarian situation with the outbreak of hostilities in October 2001, mentions the immense increase of humanitarian assistance delivered and says one should keep in mind that the humanitarian situation "had not worsened eighteen-fold". Uran Khaliq (2008), The Ethical Dimensions of the Foreign Policy of the European Union. A Legal Appraisal, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 431. Khaliq also mentions that ECHO funds were used earlier in order to "isolate the Taliban." Khaliq, *ibid.*, p. 441.

13 For more details on the indexes and their subcategories, see the ECHO website that explains the indicators to NGOs demanding funding:

[http://eu-unfafa.dgecho-partners-helpdesk.eu/financing\\_decisions/dgecho\\_strategy/gna](http://eu-unfafa.dgecho-partners-helpdesk.eu/financing_decisions/dgecho_strategy/gna)

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17 ECHO (2015), 2014 annual report, 21 August 2015, p. 17, [http://ec.europa.eu/echo/who/accountability/annual-reports\\_en](http://ec.europa.eu/echo/who/accountability/annual-reports_en), (last access 22 November 2015). One has to keep in mind that Europe-Aid also spends money on humanitarian aid. Therefore, the actual figure must be higher.

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