

Humanitarian Aid: Frequently asked questions

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(1) What is humanitarian aid?

Every year, events such as armed conflicts, droughts, floods and earthquakes trigger humanitarian crises in different parts of the world. Humanitarian aid is about helping the victims of such crises where necessary. Human and physical resources need to be rapidly mobilised to meet vital needs – for example for shelter, food, water and medical care.

Humanitarian aid is not just for those caught up in the direct aftermath of a sudden crisis. Refugees and displaced people, or communities affected by longer-lasting crises such as civil wars – who are not yet in a situation that would allow for more structural long-term development programmes – also generally depend on humanitarian assistance.

For communities struck by disaster, emergency relief deals with immediate needs. It is also important to ensure a smooth transition to longer-term actions once the immediate crisis is over. This approach is called Linking Relief, Rehabilitation and Development (LRRD). For the Commission's Humanitarian Aid department (ECHO), LRRD is a key element in developing "exit strategies" for humanitarian operations. Good relief programmes contribute to development and good development operations are a bulwark against future humanitarian crises. The Commission focuses on the interdependence of these policies to reduce human suffering and make all its aid efforts as effective as possible.

(2) What role does the EU and the European Commission play in humanitarian aid?

Humanitarian aid is a fundamental expression of European solidarity to people in need.

The Commission's relief assistance, provided through its Humanitarian Aid department (ECHO), complements EU Member States' individual efforts. The Commission is responsible for up to half of the EU's humanitarian funding, providing aid totalling around €800 million annually. The EU as a whole – Commission plus Member States - is the world's largest humanitarian aid donor, helping people in need across the globe.

The Commission's mandate for humanitarian aid is defined in Council Regulation (EC) No 1257/96. The main objectives of the humanitarian aid operations funded by the Commission are:

- to save and preserve life during emergencies and their immediate aftermath in man-made or natural disasters outside the EU;
- to provide assistance and relief to people affected by longer-lasting crises such as civil wars;
- to finance the delivery of aid, working to ensure that aid is accessible to those for whom it is intended;
- to assist refugees or displaced people wherever they find sanctuary and to help them resettle if they return home;
- to support short-term rehabilitation and reconstruction work to help victims regain a minimum level of self-sufficiency, taking long-term development objectives into account where possible;
- to ensure preparedness for natural disasters, in particular by setting up early-warning systems and financing disaster prevention projects in high-risk regions.

(3) How does the Commission provide humanitarian aid?

The European Commission's Humanitarian Aid department (ECHO) does not implement humanitarian projects itself but funds actions that are implemented through partner relief organisations: around 200 European non-governmental relief organisations (NGOs), specialised UN agencies (like UNICEF, WFP, OCHA) and members of the Red Cross/Crescent movement.

The Commission is an "active donor" – a third of ECHO's staff is permanently employed in crisis zones around the world. The main tasks of an ECHO field expert include assessing the humanitarian situation at a disaster site, identifying the most urgent needs and liaising with partner organisations that are implementing the humanitarian projects. They also monitor the proper implementation of projects and evaluate the impact of ECHO-funded operations. At the end of a humanitarian operation, ECHO field experts are involved in ensuring that rehabilitation programmes can progressively take over from the relief aid, where necessary.

The Commission adopts humanitarian aid financing decisions throughout the year on the basis its needs assessments and specific proposals made by partners. Its quickest way to respond to sudden crises is the fast-track "primary emergency decision". This unique tool allows the Commission to provide funds of up to €3 million almost immediately (a decision must be adopted within 72 hours of the event that provoked the crisis). At the same time, ECHO dispatches rapid response coordinators to ensure that vital assistance such as food, shelter materials, blankets and medicines can be provided as speedily as possible.

The Commission also takes "emergency" and "ad hoc" decisions to provide larger amounts for relief operations. In major crises, it will have a rolling programme of funding decisions that allows for flexibility in rapid-changing situations.

For longer lasting humanitarian crises, such as Darfur or the Middle East, ECHO draws up annual global plans as an overall strategic framework for action in a particular country or region.

(4) What are the underlying principles and criteria in providing humanitarian assistance?

Humanitarian aid is a concrete expression of the European Union's fundamental values: solidarity with most vulnerable populations, respect for human dignity, equality and tolerance.

The Commission has a longstanding commitment to help the victims of humanitarian crises. Since 1992, its Humanitarian Aid department (ECHO) has provided relief that goes directly to people in distress, irrespective of their nationality, religion, gender, race, ethnic origin or political affiliation.

Council Regulation (EC) No 1257/96 concerning humanitarian aid clearly states that the sole aim is to prevent or relieve human suffering and that humanitarian aid decisions (by the Commission) "must be taken impartially and solely according to the victims' needs and interests". EU humanitarian aid "must not be guided by, or subject to, political considerations".

(5) Why does the EU need a consensus on humanitarian aid?

Humanitarian actors today face a number of specific challenges. The impact of humanitarian disasters – both man-made and natural disasters – is nowadays more severe and their frequency is increasing. These trends are linked to climate change, the changing nature of conflict, extreme poverty and problems of poor governance/failed states. Civilians nearly always suffer most. There is an increasing tendency for humanitarian and international law to be ignored or openly violated. Encroachments on the 'humanitarian space' hinder access to vulnerable populations and threaten the safety of humanitarian aid workers. Other actors, not necessarily "humanitarian", but with a mandate to "assist", are becoming involved.

The environment for delivering humanitarian aid to people in need is thus ever more challenging – Darfur and Iraq are two examples.

The Commission believes it is time to strengthen the humanitarian action of the EU (undertaken by both the Commission and Member States) through an explicit statement of the principles and values that underpin the EU approach: a European Consensus on Humanitarian Aid. The Commission is therefore calling for the European Union to work more closely together on such a consensus to boost its collective response to humanitarian crises and to achieve greater efficiency and coherence in delivering humanitarian aid (see [IP/07/814](#)).

For more information:

http://ec.europa.eu/echo/whatsnew/questionnaire_en.htm

In the context of a European consensus on humanitarian aid, the Commission also believes that it is time for the EU as a whole to commit more actively to the substance of what constitutes good humanitarian donorship and how this translates into practice, promoting best practice in humanitarian action and bringing together donors and partners.

For more information on the Good Humanitarian Donorship Initiative:

<http://www.goodhumanitarianandonorship.org/>

(6) What do EU citizens think about humanitarian aid?

Europe cares. A special Eurobarometer survey on humanitarian aid reveals a high level of solidarity among EU citizens with victims of conflict and natural disasters outside the Union.¹ Nine out of ten citizens (91%) think it is justified to help by supplying humanitarian aid. Only 5% take the opposite view. There is also a strong endorsement of the Commission's mandate to provide relief aid, which is undertaken through its Humanitarian Aid department (ECHO). 88% think that EU funding in this area is important. There are no striking differences at Member State level on the issue of providing relief aid to crisis victims outside the EU.

More than half (57%) know that the European Union funds relief actions (31% for the EU15 in 2001)².

An overall majority of EU citizens (56%), and a relative majority in all Member States, think that humanitarian aid is more efficient when provided through the EU. Just over a quarter (26%) prefers relief funds to be channelled through Member States.

European citizens want to be informed about the EU's humanitarian aid activities, 87% indicating that this is important. The percentage of those who feel they are well, or relatively well-informed has doubled from 11% in 2001 to 22% today.

Full report:

http://ec.europa.eu/echo/whatsnew/barometer_en.htm

¹ Special Eurobarometer 268 was carried out in the then 25 EU Member States as well as Bulgaria and Romania. 26,853 citizens were interviewed face-to-face between 7 June and 12 July 2006 about their perception of humanitarian aid in general and EU humanitarian aid in particular.

² Percentage rate for the EU15 in 2006: 59%.

(7) Citizens are often concerned that their tax money is not being well spent. Does the Commission's humanitarian aid really reach the people in need? How does the Commission prevent fraud in humanitarian assistance?

The Commission's relief assistance is needs-based and goes directly to people in distress.

In addition, the Commission has a policy of zero tolerance for corrupt activities. Its Humanitarian Aid department (ECHO) also has as a duty to check the cost-effectiveness of ECHO-funded projects. ECHO regularly carries out strict audits and financial controls, both in the field and at the headquarters of partner relief organisations.

The Commission is one of the world's largest humanitarian aid donors and probably the only one that maintains an extensive network of relief experts in the field. Commission Decisions on the release of funds and on the type of projects to be supported, are always based on "first hand" information from a disaster scene. ECHO field staff assess and analyse the situation on the ground before decisions are taken. All ECHO-funded projects are monitored in the field by ECHO staff to ensure that the aid goes directly to those in need, in the most effective way.

(8) What is the Commission's budget for humanitarian aid and what are currently the biggest humanitarian operations of ECHO?

The Commission is one of the main sources of humanitarian aid in the world. In 2006, it provided €671 million through ECHO for relief programmes. This does not include the aid given separately by the EU's Member States. The Commission's humanitarian assistance went to projects in more than 60 countries worldwide. Its humanitarian aid budget for 2007 is more than €722 million.

If necessary, the Commission may also ask the EU's budgetary authority, the European Parliament and Council, to increase its funding by mobilising the reserve for emergency aid. This allows it to respond promptly to specific aid needs arising from events that could not have been foreseen when the budget was drawn up. More than €200 million are available in this reserve for 2007.

The biggest relief operations currently supported by the Commission's Humanitarian Aid department (ECHO) are in Sudan (Darfur in particular) and Chad, the Middle East (Palestinian Territories and Lebanon), the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the Sahel region, Afghanistan, Russia (Chechnya), Burundi, Liberia, Myanmar/Thailand and the Greater Horn of Africa.

(9) How long does it take to take a decision and to deliver aid to the victims of a humanitarian crisis?

When a hurricane or earthquake strikes, life-saving assistance such as food, shelter materials, blankets, warm clothes and medicines must be dispatched as rapidly as possible.

The quickest way for the Commission and its Humanitarian Aid department (ECHO) to respond to a sudden crisis is through the fast-track "primary emergency decision". This unique tool allows the Commission to provide funds of up to €3 million almost immediately (a decision must be adopted within 72 hours of the event that provoked the crisis), so that vital assistance can immediately be sent.

(10) What are the basic principles of international humanitarian law?

International humanitarian law (IHL) is a set of rules that seeks to limit the effects of armed conflict for humanitarian reasons. It protects persons who are not or are no longer participating in the hostilities and restricts the means and methods of warfare. It is part of international law, which is the body of rules governing relations between states. A major part of IHL is contained in the Geneva Conventions.

It is important to differentiate between international humanitarian law and human rights law. The latter applies in peacetime and many of its provisions may be suspended during an armed conflict (some provisions apply to both).

For more information:

<http://www.icrc.org/eng/ihl>

(11) What is the role of the military in humanitarian crises and what kind of relationship exists between the military and relief organisations?

It is vital to ensure the neutrality of humanitarian action. Any blurring of lines between humanitarian and military tasks should be avoided. Therefore, military forces and assets should only be used as a "last resort" in humanitarian operations in line with international guidelines.

The overall EU crisis response involves drawing on various Community and Member State instruments, including humanitarian aid and civil protection. The latter is coordinated by the Monitoring and Information Centre (MIC) in the Commission's Environment Directorate-General, in liaison with the Council Presidency. Civil protection teams provide an important contribution in helping disaster victims due to their comparative advantage in terms of speed, effectiveness and sector experience. This is particular the case in the early phase of relief response. When acting outside the EU, it is important that civil protection forces support and complement the humanitarian actors in line with agreed international principles and guidelines – in particular in relation to neutrality, impartiality and independence.

12) Who are the Commission's humanitarian partners?

Partnership is key to the effective provision of humanitarian aid. The Commission's Humanitarian Aid department (ECHO) works with about 200 non-governmental relief organisations, specialised United Nations agencies like UNICEF, OCHA, WHO and WFP and international organisations such as the international Red Cross/Crescent movement.

Having a diverse range of partners is important for ECHO because this allows for comprehensive coverage of an ever-growing list of needs in different parts of the world – and in increasingly complex situations. ECHO has developed close working relationships with its partners at the level of both policy issues and management of humanitarian operations.

For the full list of ECHO partners see:

http://ec.europa.eu/echo/partners/index_en.htm

For more information:

http://ec.europa.eu/echo/index_en.htm