HUMANITARIAN AID

Humanitarian aid is an area of EU external action that responds to needs in the event of man-made or natural disasters. The Commission’s Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (ECHO) funds relief operations and coordinates Member States’ policies and activities. Parliament and the Council of the EU act as co-legislators in shaping the EU’s humanitarian aid policy and take part in the global debate on more effective humanitarian action.

LEGAL BASIS

Article 21 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU) sets out the principles for all EU external action (Article 21(2)(g) covers humanitarian action).

Article 214 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) is the legal basis for humanitarian aid. Prior to the Lisbon Treaty, the legal basis was Article 179 of the Treaty of the European Community.

Article 214(5) forms the legal basis for the creation of a European Voluntary Humanitarian Aid Corps.

REGULATORY AND POLICY FRAMEWORK

The regulations for the provision of humanitarian aid, including its financing instruments, are laid out in Council Regulation (EC) No 1257/96 of 20 June 1996 (the Humanitarian Aid Regulation). This regulation was not amended when other instruments were overhauled in preparation for the 2007-2013 multiannual financial framework.

The overall policy framework for humanitarian assistance is outlined in the ‘European Consensus on Humanitarian Aid’ (2007), signed by the three EU institutions (the Commission, the Council and Parliament). The Consensus defines the EU’s common vision, policy objectives and principles on a number of topics, including: international humanitarian cooperation; good donorship; risk reduction and preparedness; civil protection; and civil and military relations. The Consensus also reconfirms the four humanitarian principles: humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence. The text provides for a more coordinated and coherent approach to aid delivery, linking humanitarian and development aid so as to enable the EU to respond more effectively to growing needs. The Action Plan for implementing the Consensus expired in 2013, and a new 18-month implementation plan was finalised in November 2015.

ECHO

A. Overview and impact

EUR 6.62 billion was allocated to the humanitarian aid instrument for the 2014-2020 period. The EU is the world’s leading humanitarian aid donor, providing a major proportion of global
funding for emergency relief to victims of man-made and natural disasters. Part of these funds comes directly from Member States, but a large share originates from the EU budget. The Commission’s Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (DG ECHO) is responsible for humanitarian assistance and civil protection. Christos Stylianides currently serves as Commissioner for Humanitarian Aid and Crisis Management, and has been the EU Ebola Coordinator since 24 October 2014.

ECHO has grown over the years: more than 340 staff work at its headquarters in Brussels, complemented by an extensive network of over 465 experts and local staff in 48 field offices. It does not implement humanitarian assistance programmes itself; rather, it funds operations implemented by its partners, namely NGOs, UN agencies and international organisations. ECHO’s main tasks are to provide funds, verify that finances are soundly managed and ensure that its partners’ goods and services reach the affected populations effectively and rapidly in order to respond to real needs.

Following the onset of a natural disaster or other event requiring humanitarian assistance, ECHO’s humanitarian aid experts carry out an initial assessment of the situation on the ground. Funds are then rapidly disbursed on the basis of this assessment — this is the ‘needs-based approach’ that defines ECHO’s work. Aid is channelled through more than 200 partners — including UN agencies, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and international organisations such as the International Red Cross/Red Crescent — with which ECHO has signed, *ex ante*, contractual agreements. ECHO’s structure ensures that funds are used transparently and that partners remain accountable.

In 2016, ECHO committed EUR 1.6 billion in humanitarian assistance and civil protection to help more than 134 million people in more than 80 countries. This amount represents the biggest humanitarian budget ever executed by the Commission in order to respond to exceptionally high global needs, primarily caused by several protracted conflicts and the record number of over 60 million forcibly displaced persons worldwide. In recent years, the initial humanitarian budget of the EU has been increased regularly through additional transfers, with money coming primarily from the EU Emergency Aid Reserve and redeployment from other budget lines as well as the European Development Fund.

In 2016, 40.6% of ECHO funds were allocated to Africa, 39.54% to the Middle East and European neighbouring countries, 6.29% to Asia and the Pacific, 2.43% to Central and South America and the Caribbean, 2.17% to worldwide disasters, 2.22% to civil protection, 0.4% to EU Aid Volunteers and 4.71% to complementary operations and support. Major humanitarian aid interventions continued in Syria and its neighbouring countries, the wider Middle East and North Africa, the Sahel, the Horn of Africa, the Central African Republic, South Sudan, Yemen and Ukraine. New emergencies requiring EU assistance included the El Niño crisis which affected parts of Africa, the Caribbean and Central and South America, as well as the Pacific. The EU has also maintained its focus on the world’s ‘forgotten crises’, to which 15% of the initial 2016 humanitarian budget was allocated.

Policy priorities

ECHO is working to improve its response to emergencies and provides non-EU countries with assistance to strengthen their own capacities to respond to crises and contribute to long-term development. Increasing resilience is at the heart of two flagship programmes, one in the Sahel (the AGIR programme) and another in the Horn of Africa (SHARE), which aim to coordinate humanitarian and development aid and to break the vicious cycle of climate change, hunger and poverty. A new joint communication from the European External Action Service (EEAS)
and the Commission on ‘Resilience as a strategic priority of the external action of the EU’ was published in June 2017.

Disaster risk reduction (DRR) activities are also part of ECHO’s emphasis on resilience. ECHO’s disaster preparedness programmes (DIPECHO) in Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean support early-warning systems, public-awareness campaigns and other preventative measures. The EU is a significant actor in shaping the international community’s disaster risk management efforts. The Union’s ambitious vision for the future was set out in the April 2014 communication ‘The post 2015 Hyogo Framework for Action: Managing risks to achieve resilience’, issued in preparation for the UN’s World Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction. Given the large number of refugees and displaced persons in often protracted situations, the EU agreed in 2016 to develop a stronger development-oriented approach to forced displacement. The EU will put more emphasis on supporting the socio-economic inclusion of forcibly displaced persons and addressing the root causes of long-term displacement. This approach will demand an even stronger strategic and operational link between development and humanitarian assistance.

The EU and the Member States played an important role at the World Humanitarian Summit held in May 2016 in Istanbul. The EU itself made 100 commitments in order to contribute to the ‘Agenda for Humanity’, presented at the summit by the UN Secretary-General, and to implement the ‘Grand Bargain’, an innovative new deal between different humanitarian actors to increase financial efficiency and effectiveness.

Gender integration and combating gender-based violence continue to be priorities for DG ECHO, which has introduced a gender marker for humanitarian aid operations. In line with the need to prioritise the most vulnerable groups, supporting children’s education in emergencies is another focal area.

B. Other instruments

EU assistance involves three further structures: the Union Civil Protection Mechanism, the European Voluntary Humanitarian Aid Corps and a new legal framework for providing emergency support within the Union.

— Originally created in 2001, the Union Civil Protection Mechanism now involves 34 states — the 28 Member States plus the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Iceland, Montenegro, Norway, Serbia and Turkey. The Union Mechanism builds on several tools. (1) The European Emergency Response Capacity (EERC) provides a voluntary pool of pre-committed response assets from the participating states and a structured process to identify potential capacity gaps. (2) The Emergency Response Coordination Centre (ERCC) functions as the operational core, facilitating coordination in protection interventions 24/7. (3) The Common Emergency Communication and Information System (CECIS) seeks to improve emergency communication through a web-based alert and notification application. (4) A network of trained experts available at short notice was also provided for in Decision No 1313/2013/EU of 17 December 2013.

— The European Voluntary Humanitarian Aid Corps was envisaged in Article 214(5) of the Lisbon Treaty and was established as the EU Aid Volunteers initiative in March 2014. Strengthening the EU’s capacity to respond to humanitarian crises, the initiative is intended to enhance the resilience of vulnerable communities in third countries. Its EUR 147.9 million budget will allow some 18 000 volunteers to be trained and deployed between 2014 and 2020.
A new Council regulation on emergency support within the Union was adopted on 15 March 2016 with a view to responding to the difficult humanitarian situation caused by the refugee crisis. The new regulation enables the EU to help Greece and other affected Member States address the humanitarian needs of refugees. The regulation could also be used in future to respond to other exceptional crises or disasters with severe humanitarian consequences, such as nuclear accidents, terrorist attacks and epidemics. The provision of emergency assistance will be based on Article 122(1) TFEU and DG ECHO is responsible for its implementation. Up to EUR 700 million in EU funding (taken from budget lines for domestic policies with no repercussions for humanitarian assistance in third countries) will be made available via partner organisations, such as UN agencies, the Red Cross and non-governmental organisations, from 2016 to 2018. In 2016, EUR 191.9 million was contracted, reaching a total of 45 000 beneficiaries and providing shelter, food and non-food items, and cash assistance.

ROLE OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

In the field of humanitarian aid policy, Parliament acts as co-legislator with the Council of the EU. The legal basis of the humanitarian aid policy proposed by the Commission (regulations) is negotiated with — and approved (or not) by — both the Council and Parliament, in accordance with the EU’s ordinary legislative procedure. The Commission’s implementation measures are also submitted to Parliament, which has oversight powers. Within Parliament, humanitarian aid falls within the remit of the Committee on Development (DEVE), and civil protection within that of the Committee on the Environment, Public Health and Food Safety (ENVI).

In addition, Parliament monitors the delivery of humanitarian aid and seeks to ensure that budgetary provisions match humanitarian needs. Parliament has regularly highlighted the need to increase funding for humanitarian aid and has insisted on closing the widening gap between commitments and payments. The DEVE Committee, and Parliament in general, have also sought — through opinions and resolutions, including own-initiative reports — to influence the strategic decisions and policy orientations of the Commission, such as on the EU’s contribution to the World Humanitarian Summit, education in emergencies and the response to the Ebola outbreak. Parliament reviews the Commission’s annual work programme and ECHO’s operational strategy. The Commissioner is also regularly invited to exchange views with the DEVE Committee. The adoption of the ‘European Consensus on Humanitarian Aid’ in 2007 responded in no small part to firm positions adopted by Parliament. Parliament has also been an active advocate on other policy issues, such as resilience, food security and linking humanitarian and development assistance. A hearing on emergency and humanitarian aid was held on 23 September 2018.

To strengthen Parliament’s oversight of humanitarian aid, the DEVE Committee has appointed a standing rapporteur for Humanitarian Aid every two and a half years since 2006. The rapporteur’s mandate includes defending humanitarian aid budget interests, monitoring humanitarian aid programmes and maintaining close contacts with the humanitarian aid community. The position is currently held by Enrique Guerrero Salom (Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats). He is also responsible for a report on the implementation of the humanitarian aid instrument. Parliament maintains a constant dialogue with Commissioner Styliandides. He last addressed the DEVE committee on 16 May 2018 in the framework of the structured dialogue on the Commission work programme. The topics discussed included the situation in Myanmar, Gaza, the Mediterranean and Yemen.