



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 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.

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

REGULATORY AND POLICY FRAMEWORK

The rules for the provision of humanitarian aid, including its financing instruments, are set 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 main 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-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 in order to enable the EU to respond more effectively to growing needs.

The 2019 [decision on a Union Civil Protection Mechanism](#) governs EU action in this area. It modifies a 2013 decision that dealt with prevention, preparedness, response and financial provisions. The 2016 regulation on the provision of emergency support



within the Union establishes the circumstances under which Member States may apply for EU support. It sets out the eligible actions and types of financial intervention.

ECHO

A. Overview and impact

EUR 7.1 billion was allocated to the humanitarian aid instrument for the 2014-2020 period. The Commission's proposal for the 2021-2027 multiannual financial framework allocates EUR 11 billion to humanitarian aid. 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 that funding comes directly from Member States, but a large share comes 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. EU humanitarian aid focuses on food and nutrition, shelter, healthcare, water and sanitation and education in emergencies. Janez Lenarčič is the current Commissioner for Crisis Management.

ECHO has grown over the years and has local staff in more than 40 field offices. It does not implement humanitarian assistance programmes itself; rather, it funds operations implemented by its [partners](#), namely non-governmental organisations (NGOs), United Nations agencies and international organisations such as the International Red Cross/Red Crescent. ECHO's main tasks are to provide funds, verify that finances are managed soundly 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 with which ECHO has signed ex ante contractual agreements. ECHO's structure ensures that funds are used transparently and that partners remain accountable.

In 2019, ECHO committed EUR 1.6 billion in humanitarian assistance and civil protection. This amount reflects the Commission's continuing commitment to respond to exceptionally high global needs, caused chiefly 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 regularly increased 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 [2017](#), 46.9% of ECHO funds was allocated to Africa, 37.9% to the Middle East and European neighbouring countries, 6.1% to Asia and the Pacific, 2.7% to Central and South America and the Caribbean, 1.5% to worldwide disasters and 4.7% 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 hurricanes Irma and Maria, which affected the Caribbean. The EU has also maintained its focus on the



world's 'forgotten crises', to which 15% of the initial 2017 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. Coordinating humanitarian and development aid and breaking the vicious cycle of climate change, hunger and poverty are key objectives for the EU.

[Disaster preparedness](#) activities are also part of ECHO's emphasis on resilience. The EU is a significant actor in shaping the international community's disaster risk management efforts. The European Union supports the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction, signed in 2015. The EU issued its Sendai Action Plan for disaster risk reduction in 2016. It streamlines a disaster risk-informed approach to policy making and proposes concrete activities pertaining to risk knowledge, risk investments, disaster preparedness and resilience. The Commission issued a communication on resilience in 2012, which was revised in 2017. It aims to define a strategic approach to resilience that can increase the impact of EU external action.

Given the large number of refugees and displaced persons in situations that often become protracted, the EU agreed in 2016 to devise a stronger development-oriented approach to forced displacement. The EU puts more emphasis on supporting the socio-economic inclusion of forcibly displaced persons and addressing the root causes of long-term displacement in the framework of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees' [Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework](#) and the World Bank's engagement on [displacement](#).

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', which was 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 the fight against 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 includes three further structures: the [European 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 the EU Member States plus six other participating states: North Macedonia, Iceland, Montenegro, Norway, Serbia and Turkey. The Union mechanism builds on a series of tools: (1) the [European Civil Protection Pool](#) 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 and (4) a network of trained experts available at short notice. The Civil Protection Mechanism was strengthened in 2019 through the creation of [rescEU](#), a new capacities reserve that was already operational during the 2019 forest fire season. It is expected to expand its scope to other fields such as medical emergencies or chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear incidents. It will be used as a last resort mechanism, employed when a Member State has exhausted its own means and cannot be helped by other Member States, because, for example, they are facing disasters of the same nature.

- The European Voluntary Humanitarian Aid Corps was envisaged by Article 214(5) of the Lisbon Treaty and 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 budget for the period 2014-2020 is EUR 147.9 million.
- The Council adopted a regulation on emergency support within the Union 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 to 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 or terrorist attacks. DG ECHO is responsible for its implementation. Up to EUR 643 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 NGOs, from 2016 to 2019.

ROLE OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

In the field of humanitarian aid policy, Parliament acts as co-legislator with the Council. 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, for example 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 for Crisis Management is regularly invited to exchange views with the DEVE Committee. The 'European Consensus on Humanitarian Aid' adopted in 2007 responded in no small part to the firm positions adopted by Parliament. Parliament has also been an active advocate of other policy issues, such as resilience, food security and linking humanitarian and development assistance. The DEVE committee organised a [hearing on the future of the EU's humanitarian aid](#) on 27 February 2019 and Mr Lenarčič's predecessor Commissioner Stylianides last addressed it on 30 September 2019 in the context of an exchange of views on the lessons learned over the past five years on the EU's humanitarian aid policies.

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 current rapporteur is Norbert Neuser (S&D, Germany). His mandate includes defending humanitarian aid budget interests, monitoring humanitarian aid programmes and maintaining close contacts with the humanitarian aid community. The rapporteur is also responsible for a report on the implementation of the humanitarian aid instrument.

Gonzalo Urbina Treviño
01/2020

