



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](#) 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) TFEU 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 aid 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. [Council Regulation \(EU\) 2016/369](#) of 15 March 2016 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.

The 2021 Commission communication entitled '[the EU's humanitarian action: new challenges, same principles](#)' (COM(2021)0110) aims to strengthen the EU's global humanitarian impact in order to meet the increasing demand for humanitarian aid, a problem that has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

COMMISSION DIRECTORATE-GENERAL FOR EUROPEAN CIVIL PROTECTION AND HUMANITARIAN AID OPERATIONS (ECHO)

A. Overview and impact

Under the multiannual-financial framework, EUR 11.6 billion were allocated to the EU's humanitarian aid instrument for the period 2021-2027. As such, 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 this funding comes from Member States, but a significant share derives from the EU budget.

Within the Commission, the Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (ECHO) is responsible for humanitarian assistance and civil protection. The current Commissioner for Crisis Management is Janez Lenarčič. Under him, ECHO focuses the EU's humanitarian aid on food and nutrition, shelter, healthcare, water and sanitation, and education in emergency scenarios. Having grown significantly since its creation, DG ECHO now fulfils its mandate with staff in 40 field offices around the world.

Most of the EU's humanitarian aid budget is used indirectly. ECHO does not implement humanitarian assistance programmes itself. Rather, it funds operations implemented by its [partners](#) – namely non-governmental organisations (NGOs), UN 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. While in general, the EU's humanitarian aid will continue to be delivered by the EU's humanitarian partners, the Civil Protection Mechanism and the European Humanitarian Response Capacity allow ECHO to offer limited direct aid to countries in need after disasters when traditional humanitarian delivery mechanisms via EU partners or their capacities may be insufficient or ineffective.

For 2023, ECHO can commit EUR 1.7 billion, a sum that reflects the Commission's continuing commitment to respond to exceptionally high global needs, caused chiefly by



several protracted conflicts, the impact of climate change, environmental degradation, global population growth or failed governance. In recent years, the initial humanitarian budget of the EU has regularly increased through additional transfers, with money coming primarily from the EU Solidarity and Emergency Aid Reserve (SEAR) and redeployment from other budget lines, as well as the European Development Fund.

In its 2021 communication, the Commission warned of a widening gap between the increasing level of humanitarian needs and the financial resources available globally (for instance, in December 2022, the UN estimated that only 47% of the estimated EUR 48 billion needed to finance its humanitarian assistance for 2023 were met). The Commission also highlighted that humanitarian appeals have reached an all-time high, with 235 million people in need in 2021. There is also a limited donor base, and in 2020, the top 10 donors globally accounted for 83% of reported funding.

B. Policy priorities and the reaction to the COVID-19 pandemic

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 EU supports the 2015 Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction and 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. Modified to the 'Grand Bargain 2.0' in 2021, the deal emphasises the importance of equitable and principled partnerships with local organisations and the accountability of aid to affected people.

Gender integration and the fight against gender-based violence continue to be priorities for 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.

Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the European Commission has steadily increased its humanitarian response, which amounted to EUR 420 million as of October 2020. This included the mobilisation of funds for the work of the World Health Organisation; the adaptation of operations in countries such as Colombia, Nigeria and Ukraine to factor in pandemic-related needs; funds to support needs identified by the UN Global Humanitarian Response Plan; and additional funds to reinforce the EU's humanitarian response in different countries.

The Committee on Development has held several meetings with Commissioner Lenarčič to scrutinise the Commission's humanitarian work in fighting the impact of the pandemic in developing countries. In 2023, the focus of the EU has shifted towards programmes to assist with the global recovery from the economic consequences of the pandemic, a key focus of this year's High Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development.

C. Other instruments and the EU's response to the 2022 floods in Pakistan

EU assistance includes three further structures: the [European Union Civil Protection Mechanism](#), the European Solidarity Corps and a new legal framework for providing emergency support within the Union.

- Originally created in 2001, the EU Civil Protection Mechanism now involves the EU Member States plus six other participating states: North Macedonia, Iceland, Montenegro, Norway, Serbia and Türkiye. The EU 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](#) functions as the operational core, facilitating coordination in protection interventions 24/7; (3) the Common Emergency Communication and Information System 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 and 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 Humanitarian Response Capacity](#) (EHRC) is the newest tool for humanitarian aid of the EU. The EHRC, in essence, boosts the capacity of the Civil Protection Mechanism. First proposed by the Commission in 2021 and established in 2022, the EHRC is composed of a set of operational tools for swift assistance in crises when traditional humanitarian delivery mechanisms via EU partners or their capacities may be ineffective or insufficient. The EHRC has three tools: the common logistics services, pre-positioned stockpiles of humanitarian aid supplies, and health and logistics experts. They are mobilised through the coordination of



the Emergency Response Coordination Centre based on a prior evaluation and assessment of the crises. Since its inception, the EHRC has responded to more than a dozen crises.

- The European Solidarity Corps (2021 to 2027) is a new programme that creates volunteering opportunities in the field of humanitarian aid. It includes the previous [EU Aid Volunteers](#) initiative launched in March 2014 (set up as a result of Article 214(5) TFEU calling for the establishment of a European Voluntary Humanitarian Aid Corps). The Commission provides funding in the form of grants to organisations, who then select young people (aged 18 to 30) for volunteering opportunities through the European Solidarity Corps portal. Strengthening the EU's capacity to respond to humanitarian crises, the European Solidarity Corps allows both young people and organisations holding grants to help address societal and humanitarian challenges in Europe and beyond. The budget for the period from 2021 to 2027 is EUR 1 billion;
- 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. ECHO is responsible for its implementation.

The EU's response to the 2022 floods in Pakistan serves as a good example to illustrate how some of these instruments are used in cases of acute crisis. From June to October 2022, Pakistan was affected by severe flash flooding. The EU has responded in three ways:

- a. It released emergency funds, which reached a total of EUR 30 million in October 2022. These were channelled into different humanitarian programmes, providing emergency shelter, food and clean water, emergency cash transfers and basic healthcare services in affected areas.
- b. It coordinated the incoming assistance from EU Member States through the Civil Protection Mechanism, to facilitate the more efficient delivery of aid to Pakistan.
- c. It has mobilised EUR 87 million as a contribution to international efforts to rehabilitate and reconstruct Pakistan in the long term. These funds will be used to improve agricultural chains, provide access to clean energy, and strengthen green inclusive growth in Pakistan.

Another major focus of the EU's humanitarian aid has been to provide assistance to Ukraine to address some of the hardships caused by Russia's 2022 invasion. Since February 2022, the EU has allocated more than EUR 650 million to help civilians affected by the war. These funds have been spent on meeting people's food and basic needs, offering shelter, providing health services and more. The emergency assistance to Ukraine is the largest operation coordinated by the EU Civil Protection Mechanism to date.



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 (in the form of 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 come closer to matching global 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, most recently in [March 2023](#).

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.

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 Carlos Zorrinho (S&D, Portugal). His mandate includes defending humanitarian aid budget interests, monitoring humanitarian aid programmes and maintaining close contacts with the humanitarian aid community.

[Malte Frederik Hergaden](#)
04/2023

