

Guest Editorial

The EU Humanitarian Aid Policy: Progress and Challenges

Monique PARIAT^{*}

The European Union (EU) is a leading humanitarian actor. Over the last two decades, the EU has been responding to sudden-onset emergencies and protracted conflicts, and it has been a key player in response to emblematic crises, such as: Rwanda in 1994, Darfur in 2003, Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami in 2004, earthquake in Haiti in 2010, Ebola in 2014–2016, and Syria since 2012. As one of few donors, the EU has engaged in crises that receive little or no media attention, dedicating 16% of its funding to ‘forgotten crises’, such as the Philippines, Burkina Faso or Chad. The EU has often filled response gaps in hard-to-reach areas, e.g. in Syria, Sudan and Burundi. Its added-value has been evidenced in sectors underfunded by other donors, for instance Education in Emergencies and protection.¹

With a budget of over EUR 1.5 billion last year, the EU is one of the largest humanitarian aid donors reaching out to over 130 million people stranded in humanitarian crises around the world. As a key policy setter and a member of numerous donor fora, it shapes and influences sector-wide policies and practices to ensure that aid reaches affected populations in a most effective way, based on needs and in line with the humanitarian principles. Thanks to its global field presence, it has a unique operational experience that no other actor can match.

1 HALF A CENTURY OF EUROPEAN HUMANITARIAN ACTIONS

The EU has achieved its current position through consistent development – institutional, operational and professional. Already in the 1970s, the European Commission had an instrument allowing for rapid actions in case of humanitarian crisis situations or sudden onset disasters, initially in the African, Caribbean and Pacific countries. However, this Emergency Aid Office, which was part of the Development Directorate of the Commission, reached its limits in the early 1990s. Somalia, Irak and the Kurdish crisis, the self-destruction of the former Yugoslavia and the Balkans wars, led the European

^{*} Director-General of the European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (DG ECHO) in the European Commission. Email: monique.pariat@ec.europa.eu

¹ European Commission, *Comprehensive Evaluation of the European Union Humanitarian Aid 2012–2016*, at: https://ec.europa.eu/echo/sites/echo-site/files/cha_final_report_summary_en.pdf (1 Aug. 2018).

Commission to create a fully-fledged Directorate for humanitarian actions. It has now regional offices in forty countries and a 24/7 Emergency Coordination Centre that monitors crises and disasters worldwide and coordinates EU response. Since 2004, a Commissioner for Humanitarian Aid and Crisis Management guides and oversees this work.² (1 August 2018). The EU has each year helped victims of conflicts and disasters in 110 countries around the globe, and the number of its humanitarian implementing partners has increased five-fold.³

The operational development of the EU has been complemented by its growing role in humanitarian policy and international humanitarian affairs. The 2007 European Humanitarian Consensus⁴ provided the overarching strategic framework for EU actions and the 2009 Lisbon Treaty introduced provisions on humanitarian aid.⁵ Based on that, the EU has been at the forefront of improving policy standards and practices for all main sectors: health, food and nutrition, protracted displacement, gender and age sensitive aid, disaster risk reduction, complementarities with civil protection, and many more.⁶

In parallel, the EU has been actively engaged in enhancing European and international cooperation in humanitarian aid. From coordination with EU Member States, through regular Strategic Dialogues with other donors, UN agencies and international organizations, to active participation in donor fora, the EU has been contributing to closer coordination, wider system reforms, and tackling challenges more effectively. Some examples include donor coordination before the World Humanitarian Summit, addressing cases of prevention and response to sexual exploitation and abuse in the sector, or aligning operational priorities.⁷

The progress achieved over the years by the EU has had concrete impact on people affected by conflicts and disasters and on the humanitarian system as a whole. We have noted positive impact in terms of addressing needs, greater focus on participation of affected populations, and more investments in resilience building. We have seen progress in quality of aid, delivering against results, evaluation and learning. We have experienced growth in the number and type of actors involved, increase in levels of funding, and development of disaster management

² C. Stylianides, *European Commissioner for Humanitarian Aid and Crisis Management*, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/commissioners/2014-2019/stylianides_en (1 Aug. 2018).

³ European Commission, *About European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations*, https://ec.europa.eu/echo/who/about-echo_en (1 Aug. 2018).

⁴ *European Consensus on Humanitarian Aid*, http://ec.europa.eu/echo/files/media/publications/consensus_en.pdf (1 Aug. 2018).

⁵ Art. 214 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A12007L%2FTXT> (1 Aug. 2018).

⁶ European Commission, *Humanitarian Aid*, https://ec.europa.eu/echo/what/humanitarian-aid_en (1 Aug. 2018).

⁷ European Commission, *European and International Cooperation on Humanitarian Aid*, https://ec.europa.eu/echo/partnerships/relations_en (1 Aug. 2018).

capacities.⁸ The EU and other humanitarian actors have now more means, resources and know-how than ever before. Yet, we face challenges that call for constant further progress to ensure that the EU's humanitarian action is still fit for purpose.

2 HUMANITARIAN CRISES: AN EVER-GROWING CHALLENGE

Humanitarian crises have increased in number and severity over the last twenty-five years due to increasingly complex and long-lasting conflicts. Conflicts drive 80% of all humanitarian needs and escalate funding requirements to meet those needs. They also result in blatant disrespect of International Humanitarian Law (IHL), which has dramatic knock-on effects on access to humanitarian aid, the protection of affected populations and the security of humanitarian workers.⁹ Furthermore, in some situations, certain donor governments' counter-terrorism measures can potentially affect the work of humanitarian actors, who may face a dilemma between not responding to humanitarian needs or risking criminal prosecution, leading to uneven delivery of critical assistance.

The lack of willingness among some actors to find political solutions means that these crises become protracted, generating humanitarian needs for years if not decades. In fact, protracted crises are a new normal. More than 90% of humanitarian appeals last longer than three years and the average length of a humanitarian appeal is now seven years. Some protracted crises persist for more than a decade: Somalia, Palestine, DRC, just to name a few. This means that children and adults stranded in those crises have never experienced peace. Around 90% of donor funding goes to crises lasting over the medium to long term.¹⁰ This puts a serious strain on donors' ability to respond to the needs of people in those crises and in others, especially the sudden-onset ones.

Natural disasters caused by weather-related events resulting from climate change affect the lives of 100 million people every year.¹¹ A record-breaking Atlantic Hurricane Season (Harvey, Irma and Maria), the earthquake in Mexico, or wildfires from Portugal to California are only a few examples of the deadliest natural disasters caused by climate change last year. The human cost of such disasters is estimated at 30,000 per year with additional over 4 million people injured, left homeless or in need

⁸ European Commission, *Comprehensive Evaluation of the European Union Humanitarian Aid 2012–2016*.

⁹ Humanitarian Outcomes, *Aid Worker Security Report 2017*, at 2–3, <https://aidworkersecurity.org/sites/default/files/AWSR2017.pdf> (1 Aug. 2018).

¹⁰ UN OCHA, *Multi-year Planning to Meet and Reduce Humanitarian Needs in Protracted Crises*, <https://www.unocha.org/sites/unocha/files/An%20end%20in%20sight%20Multi%20Year%20Planning.pdf> (1 Aug. 2018).

¹¹ IFRC, *World Disasters Report 2014*, at 223, <https://www.ifrc.org/Global/Documents/Secretariat/201410/WDR%202014.pdf> (1 Aug. 2018).

of emergency assistance.¹² Many of these disasters recur before communities have time to rebuild. The direct economic cost of disasters since the beginning of the twenty-first century is estimated at over EUR 2.5 trillion.¹³ Apart from that, climate change places significant strain on resources – water, arable land and crop yields – thus contributing to food instability and potentially leading to more violence and conflicts that generate humanitarian needs.

Many humanitarian crises are linked to mega trends, such as demographic pressures and urbanization. Already today 60% of refugees and 80% of internally displaced people have sought refuge in cities often leading to increased socio-economic tensions and even violence. People living in urban areas produce significantly more greenhouse gas emissions, increasing global warming that results in weather-related disasters. Greater population density also means a higher numbers of people affected in case of violence or natural hazards, and increases the risk of spread of diseases and the threat of pandemics. At the same time, the affected populations and humanitarian workers face new protection and security challenges in urban environments due to the concentration of criminal gangs, drug traffickers, and private security forces in cities.¹⁴

Social and economic fragility also fuels humanitarian crises. Today over 250 million people are either already affected by, or exposed to, humanitarian crises because they live in fragile states where governments are unable or unwilling to provide either basic services or social equality.¹⁵ A civil war costs a medium-sized developing country the equivalent of thirty years of GDP growth and it takes twenty years for trade levels to return to pre-war levels. There is a vicious circle whereby the poor are increasingly concentrated in countries affected by violence and the prolonged conflicts keep counties poor.¹⁶ In most fragile countries, the survival of the population depends to a large extent on humanitarian aid.

These trends, and their interdependence, have led to unprecedented human suffering and record humanitarian needs. In mid-2018, nearly 135 million people in forty countries are in need of humanitarian assistance. This represents more than

¹² UNISDR, Centre for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters, *The Human Cost of Weather-related Disasters*, at 5, https://www.unisdr.org/2015/docs/climatechange/COP21_WeatherDisastersReport_2015_FINAL.pdf (1 Aug. 2018).

¹³ UNISDR, *Global Assessment Report on Disaster Risk Reduction*, https://www.preventionweb.net/english/hyogo/gar/2015/en/gar-pdf/GAR2015_EN.pdf (1 Aug. 2018).

¹⁴ E. Ferris, *Megatrends and the future of humanitarian action*, 93(884) Int'l Rev. Red Cross, 917–920 (2011).

¹⁵ World Bank, *Fragility, Conflict and Violence*, <http://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/fragilityconflictviolence/overview> (1 Aug. 2018).

¹⁶ A. Marc, *Conflict and Violence in the 21st Century Current Trends as Observed in Empirical Research and Statistics*, <https://www.un.org/pga/70/wp-content/uploads/sites/10/2016/01/Conflict-and-violence-in-the-21st-century-Current-trends-as-observed-in-empirical-research-and-statistics-Mr.-Alexandre-Marc-Chief-Specialist-Fragility-Conflict-and-Violence-World-Bank-Group.pdf> (1 Aug. 2018).

a quarter of the EU28 population. Moreover, 68.5 million people – the equivalent of the whole of France – are today displaced.¹⁷ The humanitarian system is being challenged to do more, for more people, and at greater cost.

3 FOUR AVENUES FOR THE FUTURE OF HUMANITARIAN AID

Given the scale of today's crises and disasters, funding to cover humanitarian needs cannot keep up, despite record contributions by donors. We need to collectively do more and better to confront these challenges. While the needed improvements are multifaceted, here is a sample of the key areas that require more efforts.

Firstly, we must **secure the humanitarian space**. Conflicts generate 80% of humanitarian work but solving conflicts is not the task of humanitarian responders. Conflicts require first and foremost political solutions. While it is clear that humanitarian aid is neither a political, military nor a peace-building tool, humanitarian actors must understand the political and security environment in which they operate. They must work with others, bring to their attention the atrocities of humanitarian crises, and enable them to take appropriate action.¹⁸ Humanitarians can contribute a lot from their side: share field intelligence, ensure effective civil-military coordination, provide dedicated training on IHL, support actors that engage in dialogue and advocacy with parties to conflicts to ensure access, protection and security, and place protection at the heart of humanitarian efforts.

Secondly, recurrent and **protracted humanitarian crises and prolonged forced displacement mean that humanitarian aid can no longer carry the burden on its own**. Stronger partnership with development efforts to provide more sustainable solutions is a must today. The humanitarian-development nexus approach is crucial in this regard, starting with joint analysis, planning, programming, and clear exit strategies based on respective strengths. The response should not only address the humanitarian needs but also better management of different types of risks. This links to investing more in prevention, disaster risk reduction and resilience-building: building sustainable local capacity to empower local communities to withstand the consequences of a disaster and to facilitate the humanitarian response.¹⁹

Thirdly, the changing humanitarian landscape **requires the humanitarian community to be much more efficient than today**. This entails putting collective

¹⁷ OCHA, *Global Humanitarian Overview June 2018*, <https://interactive.unocha.org/publication/globalhumanitarianoverview/> UNHCR, *Figures at Glance 2018*, <http://www.unhcr.org/figures-at-a-glance.html> (1 Aug. 2018).

¹⁸ EU Global Strategy and EU Integrated Approach,

¹⁹ European Commission, *Humanitarian-Development Nexus*, https://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/policies/fragility-and-crisis-management/resilience-building-humanitarian-development-nexus_en; *Council Conclusions on Operationalising the Humanitarian-Development Nexus*, <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/24010/nexus-st09383en17.pdf> (1 Aug. 2018).

responsibility above individual institutional interests to achieve greater impact through pooling of resources and know-how. Effective decision-making requires reliable needs assessments, focus on results, cost-efficiency and accountability to affected populations. The so-called Grand Bargain will be key in this respect but both donors and implementers must live up to the commitments they had made.²⁰ Operational effectiveness calls for effective delivery mechanisms. Cash assistance is a prominent example in this context. It not only provides people in need with greater choice, flexibility and dignity, but it also reduces overheads, unit and transaction costs. It has already proven a very successful modality e.g. in supporting Syrian refugees in Turkey and Lebanon, or Somali refugees in the neighbouring countries.²¹ Research, innovation, and scientific solutions can also help improve the effectiveness of humanitarian action. Digitalization offers numerous opportunities, such as proximity to and engagement of the affected populations, tools to collect and assess needs, and technological assets like satellite imagery. But it also poses challenges, such as trust and privacy of data, and these must be comprehensively tackled.²²

Fourthly, apart from ensuring the most efficient use of every euro spent, **we also need more resources** as it is clear that current funding levels are not sufficient to meet humanitarian needs. The system has suffered from over-dependence on a few donors. While non-traditional donors, the private sector, charities and foundations have in some crises been real game-changers, but we still need to find the right way to engage them in the best possible way to unlock their full potential.²³

The above issues need to be addressed in a wider context of geo-political challenges: the retreat of multilateralism, the mistrust for the rules-based global order, the raise of populism and nationalism, the tensions around growing inequalities. All of them have an impact on humanitarian aid. Questioning the climate change and the Paris agreement is detrimental to addressing one of the key drivers behind humanitarian needs. Cutting budget to the UN and for humanitarian programmes widens the funding gap and increases an inability of responders to provide relief. Disrespect of international obligations leads to greater disrespect for IHL. Therefore, the EU will need to put even more efforts to safeguard multilateralism, while supporting the necessary reforms to the architecture of global governance.²⁴

²⁰ https://ec.europa.eu/echo/what-we-do/humanitarian-aid/aid-efficiency_en (1 Aug. 2018).

²¹ https://ec.europa.eu/echo/what/humanitarian-aid/cash-based-assistance_en (1 Aug. 2018).

²² *ICRC Institutional Strategy 2019–2022*, at 13–14.

²³ *UN High-Level Panel on Humanitarian Financing, Too Important to Fail – addressing the humanitarian financing gap*, <http://www.un.org/news/WEB-1521765-E-OCHA-Report-on-Humanitarian-Financing.pdf> (1 Aug. 2018).

²⁴ [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2017/603922/EPRS_BRI\(2017\)603922_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2017/603922/EPRS_BRI(2017)603922_EN.pdf) (1 Aug. 2018).