



EVALUATION OF THE EUROPEAN UNION EXTERNAL ACTION

*EXECUTIVE SUMMARY*

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***COMBINED EVALUATION OF DG ECHO'S  
RESPONSE TO THE VENEZUELAN  
REGIONAL CRISIS AND OF DG ECHO'S  
PARTNERSHIP WITH UNHCR, 2017-2021***

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**Combined Evaluation of DG ECHO's Response to the Venezuelan regional crisis and of DG ECHO's Partnership with UNHCR**

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY (DG ECHO'S RESPONSE TO VENEZUELAN REGIONAL CRISIS)**

In 2022, ICF was asked by the European Commission's Directorate General for Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid (DG ECHO) to conduct a Combined evaluation of the European Union (EU)'s humanitarian interventions in response to the Venezuelan regional crisis and of DG ECHO's partnership with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), covering the period 2017-2021. The purpose of the assignment was to provide an independent and retrospective assessment of both components. The scope of each component of the evaluation consisted of:

- Part A assessed DG ECHO's response to the Venezuelan regional crisis (2017-2021). It considered all DG ECHO-funded activities in Venezuela and neighbouring countries hosting refugees and migrants from Venezuela during the evaluation period, covering all relevant sectors.
- Part B evaluated DG ECHO's partnership with UNHCR (2017-2021). It considered the strategic and operational partnership between DG ECHO and UNHCR at a global level, focusing on identifying lessons learned.

The work was carried out by ICF in collaboration with Econometría and with inputs from humanitarian aid experts, between August 2022 and June 2023. This is the executive summary of Part A of the evaluation. As such, it provides a summary of the methodological approach followed to evaluate the EU's humanitarian interventions in response to the Venezuela regional crisis (2017-2021) as well as the key findings and recommendations stemming from the evaluation.

### **Methodological approach**

Part A of the evaluation was a traditional ex-post, theory-based evaluation. It was designed to answer to 10 evaluation questions covering six evaluation criteria (relevance, coherence, effectiveness, efficiency, sustainability, and EU added value). A variety of methods were used to collect and analyse primary and secondary data, which was triangulated to produce robust findings. Desk-based research included an in-depth review of more than 260 documents (for both components of the evaluation), analysis of the entire portfolio of 80 actions funded by DG ECHO to address the evaluation regional crisis during the evaluation period and a more detailed review of the project documentation for 40 of those actions, and the analysis of social media data across eleven Latin American and Caribbean (LAC) countries to analyse the experience of Venezuelans and host communities across the region. Field-based research included an online survey for DG ECHO partners (39 response), a mini-mobile survey that targeted end-beneficiaries of DG ECHO-funded actions (336 responses) and 23 key informant interviews with 26 stakeholders (DG ECHO officials, other EU institutions, DG ECHO partners, national coordination platforms, cluster/sector representatives and other donors). The team also conducted four field missions (in-country missions in Venezuela, Colombia and Ecuador and a remote mission in Panama) which entailed 116 individual and group interviews with key stakeholders, 25 focus group discussions with beneficiaries and project visits to selected DG ECHO-funded actions.

### **Overview of the context**

The deteriorating economic crisis and political instability that Venezuela has undergone for over a decade has fuelled a humanitarian crisis in the country that escalated significantly after 2015, cutting access to food, water sanitation, education, and healthcare and resulting in an important decline in living conditions across the country. As of March 2022, more than 19 million people in Venezuela were in need of humanitarian assistance as a result of a collapsed healthcare and education system, poor water and sanitation infrastructure, limited access to food which has resulted in high levels of food insecurity and malnutrition across the country, and exposure to risks and negative coping mechanisms among the Venezuelan population. The crisis has also pushed over seven million Venezuelans to flee the country since 2014, mostly towards other Latin American and Caribbean (LAC) countries, with many of them being forced to travel on foot and/or cross the border irregularly. Along with the risks and the needs to which they were exposed during the journey, the mass exodus has strained the resources and infrastructure of the host countries which, coupled with complex political relationships and high poverty levels elsewhere in the region, created

additional challenges for both Venezuelan migrants and refugees in the region. In total, the 2021 Regional Refugee and Migrant Response Plan (RMRP) estimated that approximately 5.6 million Venezuelan migrants and refugees were in need of humanitarian assistance in 2021. The main needs were observed as regards protection (access to documentation and protection services, legal assistance, protection against different types of violence, abuse and exploitation, psychosocial support) and access to healthcare, education, food and shelter.

DG ECHO was one of the first donors to respond to the crisis and the second largest donor during 2017-2021. During that period, it funded 80 humanitarian actions to respond to the crisis, amounting to EUR 237 million. Due to the limited presence of other donors in Venezuela, DG ECHO primarily focused on the internal dimension of the crisis, dedicating two thirds of the funding to address the humanitarian needs of vulnerable populations in Venezuela (e.g. children under five, pregnant and lactating women, the elderly, people with disabilities, indigenous communities and people left behind). The prioritised sectors were Health, Nutrition, WASH, Education in Emergencies (EiE) and Protection. As of 2021, DG ECHO prioritised border zones, vulnerable peri-urban areas and large urban settlements. Outside of Venezuela, it aimed to follow vulnerable Venezuelan migrants and refugees along their journey, focusing on the main affected countries and hotspots. The prioritised sectors were Protection, Health, WASH and EiE. Assistance was mostly provided in-kind.

### **Relevance**

During 2017-2021, DG ECHO's response to the Venezuelan regional crisis was relevant and adapted to the context. The adoption of a regional approach was a suitable decision that allowed to address cross-border aspects and common needs and to ensure greater visibility of the crisis, although its operationalisation faced several challenges and limitations. Along with entailing complex administration and coordination due to the high number of countries covered, it posed challenges given the differences in the context and response in each country and led to missed opportunities to better exploit synergies and complementarity between different crises and humanitarian budget lines in some countries. The evaluation also found that some multi-country projects funded by DG ECHO lacked a regional vision and did not sufficiently coordinate across borders.

Separating the two dimensions of the crisis (humanitarian crisis in Venezuela and the migratory crisis in the region) was appropriate to adequately consider the specific context, challenges and needs faced inside Venezuela and in neighbouring countries. DG ECHO's geographic prioritisation was based on vulnerability and was considered appropriate to respond to the most urgent needs in light of the limited funding available. The evaluation also found that DG ECHO's strategy addressed the most pressing needs both within and outside of Venezuela and demonstrated a degree of flexibility in adapting to the evolving situation and changing needs. However, the limited funding available and the focus on life-saving activities hindered DG ECHO's ability to expand and fully adjust to the protracted nature of the crisis over time.

At project level, funded actions were generally aligned with DG ECHO's strategy in terms of thematic, sectoral and geographical coverage. Horizontal issues like gender and age considerations, capacity building, protection mainstreaming and resilience against disasters were also considered by partners, although room for further improvement was identified. Overall, DG ECHO-funded actions were well designed and tailored to the specific context and needs, and they considered the effects of the crisis on affected populations in a differentiated manner. DG ECHO partners' needs assessments were increasingly thorough and comprehensive over the evaluation period, which allowed them to gradually address the most pressing needs of the most vulnerable groups. However, there were limitations in the scope of the response, trade-offs in addressing various needs, and the consideration of specific vulnerable groups mainly due to the funding limitation. Similarly, although beneficiaries were actively involved in the design and implementation of the funded actions, DG ECHO partners reported challenges to effectively involve specific vulnerable groups (LGBTQI+ community, young migrants and transnational indigenous populations) due to difficulties in adequately assessing their needs and weaknesses in conducting risk analyses.

DG ECHO partners were able to monitor and adapt their response to the evolving situation and needs of beneficiaries. However, there were some shortcomings, including difficulties in organising

information, ensuring indicator comparability, relying on outdated or unreliable secondary data, and lacking primary data and reliable sectoral analysis. DG ECHO's monitoring visits were found to be instrumental in promoting adaptability, capacity-building, and addressing potential issues.

### Coherence

DG ECHO's response in Venezuela was compliant with humanitarian principles as well as the 'do not harm' principle and coherent with DG ECHO thematic and sectoral policies. In Colombia, IHL was also considered in the context of situations that involved Venezuelan migrants and refugees affected by the internal conflict (the so-called *doble afectación* phenomenon). DG ECHO and their partners faced some challenges to ensure a principled approach, especially in Venezuela, where the restrictive environment in Venezuela and the politicisation of the crisis posed risks from the perspective of the humanity and neutrality principles. Limited reliable data and the lack of experience of partners operating in a humanitarian response also posed challenges to alignment with humanitarian principles and standards, especially at the start of the evaluation period. These challenges and risks were, however, proactively flagged and dealt with, mostly through capacity building of (local) partners, monitoring missions, data collection and advocacy. DG ECHO's support in the process – through monitoring missions and technical support – was also found to be key.

The coordination of the humanitarian response to the Venezuelan regional crisis was complex and evolved differently across LAC countries during 2017-2021. The coordination of the response to the internal dimension of the crisis was led, from 2019 onwards, by UN OCHA and the Humanitarian Country Team established in Venezuela. In turn, the response to its external dimension was co-led by UNHCR and IOM through the Inter-Agency Coordination Platform for Migrants and Venezuelans (R4V) platform, established at regional level as well as at national and local level in selected countries (Colombia, Ecuador, Brazil and Peru). DG ECHO and its partners made use of these two coordination mechanisms, along with other coordination structures/initiatives at international, regional and national level (e.g. Solidarity Donor Conference, OCHA ROLAC, LAC RMD Coalition, Donor coordination groups) to coordinate their response with other actors. Coordination also took place informally, through (bilateral) information exchange. DG ECHO's level of engagement and role in the various coordination mechanisms varied between countries and mechanisms. While it played a very prominent role inside Venezuela, where it enhanced and steered coordination and contributed significantly to the arrival of UN OCHA and the establishment of the Humanitarian Country Team in 2019, its coordination role was less significant in other countries in the region with more developed humanitarian coordination structures.

The extent to which DG ECHO coordinated effectively with other donors (including development donors) also varied between countries. In Venezuela, and to some extent in Colombia, DG ECHO had a comparatively bigger role by leading donors' groups and, in Venezuela, advocating for, and facilitating, the development and functioning of a humanitarian coordination system. In contrast, in countries like Ecuador, DG ECHO's role in coordination was largely limited. Efforts to collaborate with development donors (including DG INTPA) were also observed, but little evidence that these led to effective cooperation was found, except in Venezuela, where regular exchanges between DG ECHO and DG INTPA took place. Overall, the evaluation found that while DG ECHO managed to align its response to the crisis with other donor initiatives and overlaps were largely avoided, donor coordination remained limited throughout the 2017-2021 period. At the start of the evaluation period, the number of humanitarian donors in the LAC region was very low, and hence coordination opportunities were limited. During the second half of the evaluation period, synergies could have been better exploited, as coordination in many cases remained limited to information exchange. Nonetheless, some improvements were observed towards the end of the evaluation as coordination became more regular, effective, and structured.

At project level, DG ECHO promoted complementarity and coordination between the funded actions with other programmes and projects inside Venezuela and the region, also supporting its partners' coordination efforts through field monitoring missions, regular meetings, funding of coordination mechanisms and advocacy. DG ECHO partners regularly participated in coordination meetings and the various coordination structures, but the extent to which a coordinated response was effectively implemented on the ground differed between and within countries. Overall, however, stakeholders

consulted considered that coordination at project level had slightly improved during the evaluation period, while noting that it had become increasingly complex due to the worsening of the crisis in Venezuela and the growing number of humanitarian actors and coordination mechanisms. In Venezuela, key coordination challenges included the restrictive environment and lack of experience of partners, which made it difficult for partners to deliver a coordinated and comprehensive response. In the region, the establishment of the R4V platform led to a duplication of coordination structures which resulted in inefficiencies and a lack of clarity amongst those intervening in the region, especially in countries where coordination mechanisms were well established.

### **Effectiveness**

The evaluation found that despite operational challenges faced by DG ECHO and its partners (in Venezuela and the region), DG ECHO's response achieved most elements of the Theory of Change (activities, results, outcomes and impacts). The actions implemented covered most types of activities illustrated in the ToC, especially for the sectors that received most funding (Health, Protection, Education in Emergencies and WASH in Venezuela and the region, along with Nutrition in Venezuela). Shelter and Food Security activities were comparatively more limited, and few Livelihood assistance activities were funded in light of the prioritisation of most urgent needs. In line with this, the main changes reported in terms of results, outcomes, and impacts, were reported in the Protection, Health and Education in Emergencies sectors, while little to no progress was observed with respect to increased resilience of crisis-affected populations and the finding of sustainable solutions to the crisis to prevent future crises. Some improvements were noted in coordination and strengthening the humanitarian response, with partners demonstrating slight performance enhancements over time. Ultimately, DG ECHO's response was deemed to have contributed to achieving the objectives set (i.e. saving lives, alleviating human suffering and safeguarding the integrity and human dignity of affected populations).

Several factors influenced the implementation and impact of the response during the evaluation period. Operational factors arose from the limited international/humanitarian experience in Venezuela and other countries (especially at the onset of the crisis), difficulties in cooperating with national and local authorities in some countries and regions and the existence of a double coordination structure in the region. External factors, such as the politicisation of the crisis (in Venezuela and the region), the COVID-19 pandemic, insecurity in certain areas, and growing xenophobia and tensions with local populations in some countries also forced DG ECHO partners to adapt their operations. In Venezuela specifically, DG ECHO and its partners faced additional obstacles due to barriers to humanitarian operations in the country and numerous logistical difficulties. The ability of DG ECHO and its partners to generate a more significant impact was hampered by the limited funding available (which forced to adopt a very narrow focus on live-saving, emergency response), the lack of investment from national governments (in Venezuela but also in the region), and the continued deterioration of the socio-economic situation in Venezuela.

During the evaluation period, and in the run-up to 2017, DG ECHO also placed significant focus on advocacy and communication activities. Their efforts focused on raising awareness of the crisis, mobilising funding, and promoting adherence to humanitarian standards among partners. In Venezuela, DG ECHO also engaged extensively in bilateral and multilateral advocacy (behind the scenes due to the need to keep low visibility) to open the humanitarian space and facilitate operations and coordination in the country. These activities, alongside other factors, contributed to improvements in visibility and recognition of the crisis, expanded humanitarian space in Venezuela, and increased international presence in the region from 2019 onwards. DG ECHO played a particularly crucial advocacy role within Venezuela, where it helped establish and enhance coordination mechanisms. In contrast, the main shortcomings of DG ECHO's advocacy identified by the evaluation concerned its impact on coordination outside of Venezuela, namely linked to the limited impact of advocacy efforts to simplify the (double) coordination structure and the room for stronger advocacy towards other donors to ensure follow-up of the humanitarian response.



## Efficiency

DG ECHO encouraged the adoption of cost-effective approaches by partners and took actions to ensure cost-effectiveness throughout the project cycle to the extent possible, in light of constraints imposed by the context as well as limited internal tools, data and human resources to carry out a sounder cost-effective analysis. Humanitarian Implementation Plans for Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC HIPs) stressed the need to select the most cost-effective modality and promoted an integrated/multi-sectoral approach. Cost-effectiveness/efficiency was also one of the proposed actions assessed by DG ECHO at proposal stage and monitored throughout the implementation of the project (notably during field missions). However, DG ECHO faced challenges in assessing this criterion due to the complexity, urgency and variability of the context and activities and, possibly, the lack of specific DG ECHO guidelines and benchmarks to do so. The limited number of alternative proposals addressing similar needs rendered the criterion less useful.

At project level, DG ECHO-funded actions were designed and implemented balancing efficiency and cost-effectiveness with other elements. Along the project cycle, obstacles were generally addressed or mitigated, opportunities for efficiency and effectiveness gains were explored, and lessons learned incorporated. Overall, there were no significant cost differences between initial and final budget of the funded actions, and expected results were mostly achieved. Consulted stakeholders also indicated that, overall, the benefits of the portfolio of actions outweighed their costs, although available data does not allow for a full assessment of their efficiency and cost effectiveness.

## Sustainability

DG ECHO showed a strong willingness to collaborate with development actors and actively engage in coordination mechanisms and conferences, but progress in finding durable solutions to the protracted regional crisis was limited. DG ECHO promoted sustainability, resilience building, and the operationalisation of the humanitarian-development nexus in its strategy through various means, including localisation of aid, capacity building, participatory approaches, resilience mainstreaming, and coordination efforts. However, challenges such as political factors, weak infrastructure, limited resources, and lack of coordination have further hindered the sustainability of funded actions. Despite these limitations, DG ECHO made efforts to foster collaboration and align with development actors, including within the EU by seeking interlinkages, synergies and complementarity with other EU-funded initiatives. DG ECHO also sought to collaborate with DG INTPA, although synergies on the ground were limited. Overall, the operationalisation of the nexus was limited and fragmented. However, this shortcoming cannot be attributed specifically to DG ECHO, as it was a challenge faced by the broader humanitarian community involved in the response to the Venezuelan regional crisis. The evaluation found that there is a need for stronger coordination, increased funding, comprehensive strategies, and improved collaboration to enhance the operationalisation of the nexus and address the challenges of the protracted regional crisis.

## EU added value

DG ECHO's response was overall perceived as having generated significant added value. DG ECHO's funding added value compared to that of other donors due to its scale (DG ECHO was the second largest donor to the Venezuelan regional crisis) and timing (DG ECHO was among the first donors to respond to the crisis), the activities and areas covered (DG ECHO funded funding gaps) and its flexibility. Other comparative advantages of DG ECHO's involvement in the response to the crisis were identified. These were primarily linked to DG ECHO's field presence and technical expertise (which also ensured a good level of understanding of the context and key needs) and its commitment to ensuring a principled humanitarian response.

## Recommendations

Considering the evaluation findings, the following strategic recommendations are proposed:

**1.** *DG ECHO should maintain the regional approach at strategic level but prioritise country-specific approaches at operational level, except when a regional approach is more appropriate:* while HIPs should remain regional and establish a regional strategy focusing on common issues, needs and cross-border challenges, they should identify national specificities and draw attention to specific

national needs and related response priorities. At operational level, single-country projects should be prioritised, with multi-country projects being used only when necessary (to tackle common needs and issues or reinforce the border dimension) or when they are likely to yield greater impact. When multi-country approaches are used, DG ECHO should work closely with partners to ensure harmonised approaches across borders and encourage enhanced coordination and cooperation within and between partners. Internal tools and process for the appraisal of multi-country projects should also be strengthened to ensure concrete and efficient evaluation.

**2. DG ECHO should establish objectives and priorities for their response to the internal and external dimensions of the crisis in the medium term and, where and when relevant, further exploit opportunities to promote and facilitate a progressively implemented transition to a long-term response by development and/or government actors:** the co-existence of humanitarian needs and (growing) longer-term needs in the context of the crisis, coupled with the increased predictability of how the crisis will evolve in the medium term, render the establishment of medium-term objectives for DG ECHO's response to the crisis feasible and relevant. The HIPs should reflect DG ECHO's priorities in the short, but also the medium term, identifying areas and / or population groups expected to continue requiring humanitarian assistance (and the type of support that will likely be required) and those which would benefit from a progressively implemented transition to government/development-led interventions covering long-term needs. This should be accompanied by a higher degree of predictability of the funding to the crisis, a progressive adaptation of the focus of the response at operational level (where allowed by the local context and the level of funding allocated to respond to the crisis) and enhanced advocacy towards other humanitarian and/or development actors to raise awareness about existing long-term needs and priorities in areas where the operationalisation of the Nexus and exist strategies are increasingly necessary.

**3. DG ECHO should expand its capacity-building efforts to further enhance data systematisation and should promote and support initiatives seeking to improve information management/sharing among humanitarian actors in the region and to facilitate collaborative learning:** during the evaluation period, progress in this area was observed, but room for further improvement was identified in relation to data systematisation, the quality of needs assessments and risk analyses, partner cooperation and the ability to effectively reach certain vulnerable populations. DG ECHO should continue providing technical and financial support to partners and promote and support additional initiatives that would ideally be led by existing coordination platforms, working groups or clusters (e.g. technical exchanges between humanitarian actors). In the absence of such initiatives, DG ECHO should consider the possibility of organising similar sessions among its partners. DG ECHO could also advocate for the creation of an online platform enabling information sharing and knowledge management to promote collaborative learning among partners.

**4. DG ECHO should ensure that lessons learned are systematically collected, recorded, shared and acted upon by DG ECHO and its partners across the LAC region and promote similar initiatives more widely across the region:** DG ECHO should set up lessons learned sessions within DG ECHO (where DG ECHO officers from HQ and Field offices would participate) to ensure that lessons learned are shared and discussed systematically and broadly across the region. It should also promote and support exchanges of good practices/lessons learned (ideally led by existing coordination platforms, working groups or clusters) and, in their absence, establish such sessions with its partners.

**5. DG ECHO should continue exploiting its role as leading and knowledgeable donor in the region to communicate and advocate more strongly to reinstate the visibility of the crisis and enhance donor coordination:** the Venezuelan regional crisis has become protracted and international funding has decreased in recent years. DG ECHO should therefore engage in stronger advocacy and communication (at EU and international level) to reinstate its visibility and prevent it from becoming a forgotten crisis, building on previous efforts and its knowledge of the context and the needs. It should also further use its leading role to ensure more meaningful coordination between donors across the region.

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY (DG ECHO'S PARTNERSHIP WITH UNHCR)**

In 2022, ICF was asked by the European Commission's Directorate General for Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid (DG ECHO) to conduct a Combined evaluation of the European Union (EU)'s humanitarian interventions in response to the Venezuelan regional crisis and of DG ECHO's partnership with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), covering the period 2017-2021. The purpose of the assignment was to provide an independent and retrospective assessment of both components. The scope of each component of the evaluation consisted of:

- Part A assessed DG ECHO's response to the Venezuelan regional crisis (2017-2021). It considered all DG ECHO-funded activities in Venezuela and neighbouring countries hosting refugees and migrants from Venezuela during the evaluation period, covering all relevant sectors.
- Part B evaluated DG ECHO's partnership with UNHCR (2017-2021). It considered the strategic and operational partnership between DG ECHO and UNHCR at a global level, focusing on identifying lessons learned.

The work was carried out by ICF in collaboration with Econometría and with inputs from humanitarian aid experts, between August 2022 and June 2023. This is the executive summary of Part B of the evaluation. As such, it provides a summary of the methodological approach followed to evaluate DG ECHO's partnership with UNHCR (2017-2021) as well as the key findings and recommendations stemming from the evaluation.

### **Methodological approach**

Part B of the evaluation followed a theoretical approach at its core but was more formative in nature. It combined elements of a process evaluation to examine in detail the performance and quality of the partnership and to identify the influencing factors. It was designed to answer to six evaluation questions covering three evaluation criteria (coherence, efficiency and effectiveness). A variety of methods were used to collect and analyse primary and secondary data, which was triangulated to produce robust findings. Desk-based research included an in-depth review of more than 260 documents (for both components of the evaluation), analysis of the entire portfolio of 136 DG ECHO-funded actions implemented by UNHCR during the evaluation period and a more detailed review of the project documentation for 40 of those actions. An online survey for DG ECHO and UNHCR (HQ and Field) staff was also conducted (43 responses, i.e. 22 from DG ECHO staff and 21 from UNHCR staff) as well as 25 key informant interviews with DG ECHO and UNHCR officials in HQ and Field/Regional Offices, other EU institutions and other donors. Along with drawing evidence from the four field missions conducted in the context of Part A of the evaluation (in-country missions in Venezuela, Colombia and Ecuador and a remote mission in Panama), three field missions (remote field mission in Bangladesh and in-country missions in Chad and Jordan) were carried out. The three field missions entailed 42 individual and group interviews and project visits to DG ECHO-funded actions implemented by UNHCR in Chad and Jordan.

### **Overview of the context**

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) was established by the UN General Assembly in 1950 with the mandate to provide international protection and humanitarian assistance, and to seek durable solutions for persons within its core mandate which originally included only refugees (and asylum seekers), but was later expanded to also cover returnees, stateless persons and – in certain circumstances – also internally displaced persons. The EU and its Member States are among UNHCR's largest donors. In 2020, they provided USD 1.6 billion, accounting for 20% of the total UNHCR budget, following the US with USD 1.9 billion (25% of the total budget).

DG ECHO's partnership with UNHCR is regulated by the Financial and Administrative Framework Agreement (FAFA), which is implemented through action-related funding agreements. Moreover, in 2005 the EU (including DG ECHO) signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with UNHCR that established the general principles and objectives for a Strategic Partnership between them.

DG ECHO funds UNHCR interventions all over the world and in several sectors. Over the 2017–2021 period, most DG ECHO funding to UNHCR was provided to actions implemented in Europe (45% of total funding) followed by actions in the Middle East (29%) and Africa (16%). Greece, Lebanon and Türkiye were the main UNHCR operations receiving DG ECHO funding over the evaluation period. The three sectors that received the largest funding from DG ECHO to UNHCR in the period 2017–2021 were multi-purpose cash transfer, protection and shelter and settlements.

### **Coherence**

DG ECHO and UNHCR were highly complementary in their mandates. Even though the provision of protection is at the core of both DG ECHO and UNHCR's mandates (and of the partnership), the partners had a somewhat different understanding of what protection entails at operational level.

DG ECHO and UNHCR were also well aligned in their strategic priorities and objectives (e.g. ensuring protection of persons in situations of forced displacement, ensuring a better response to the needs of people displaced due to disasters and climate change, minimising the environmental footprint of the provision of humanitarian aid, etc.). The partners also shared common priorities in the context of the Grand Bargain commitments as well as on other cross-cutting issues (e.g. coordination and the Triple Nexus). The degree of alignment in terms of operational priorities was generally good but varied across countries. Some differences were identified in terms of prioritisation of sectors / transfer modalities and DG ECHO and UNHCR views on durable solutions and long-term interventions and their links with humanitarian aid.

Overall, DG ECHO and UNHCR were also well aligned in their approaches to needs assessments, vulnerability and risk analysis. At operational level, however, the quality of UNHCR's needs and risk analysis and their alignment with DG ECHO's requirements varied from action to action and depending on the country. The degree of alignment between DG ECHO and UNHCR targeting strategies also varied across countries and contexts. Some misalignments in DG ECHO and UNHCR targeting strategies were identified in several contexts.

DG ECHO and UNHCR were generally aligned in their advocacy priorities at global level. At country level, the partners also generally shared similar advocacy priorities although in some contexts, they were not fully aligned or disagreed on their preferred approach to advocacy. The evaluation period also saw an increased alignment in DG ECHO and UNHCR communication and visibility efforts and enhanced commitment in this area from both partners. Nevertheless, challenges in the dissemination of communication materials to an EU-wide audiences as well as quality issues regarding field visibility were also identified.

### **Efficiency**

Opportunities for efficiency gains were identified at various levels to different degrees, even if discussions between the partners mostly focused on other considerations. However, the impact of discussions on efficiency gains was limited. DG ECHO and UNHCR staff consulted indicated that this was mostly due to: lack of detailed and timely information on project/activities and limited flexibility of UNHCR to take on board DG ECHO's recommendations; insufficient information about which partners and activities/projects were funded by DG ECHO; and misalignments in the partner's timelines.

The partnership did not have a significant impact on decreasing management-related costs, including administrative burden. The partners have different views on reporting requirements. While DG ECHO considers that the reporting by UNHCR could be further improved, UNHCR considers that DG ECHO reporting requirements are too heavy and cumbersome (especially when compared to those of other donors and the amount of funding provided).

The partnership contribution to improving the cost-effectiveness of the partners' humanitarian responses varied across countries and projects, with strategic and high-level dialogues having a limited influence on this aspect. Overall, UNHCR presented a more positive assessment of the impact partnership on cost-effectiveness and timeliness than DG ECHO, with the latter indicating that the impact was limited. Nevertheless, some best practices and positive examples of the impact of the partnership on cost-effectiveness were shared by DG ECHO, including the expertise and

dimension of UNHCR that allowed DG ECHO to address certain crises (which might not have been possible or less cost-effective if UNHCR would not have been involved) and the joint work on some cash-programmes.

### **Effectiveness**

The strategic partnership approach contributed to improving the cooperation between DG ECHO and UNHCR, particularly through discussions held during High-level and Strategic Dialogue meetings. The partners interacted through regular and timely dialogue (formal and informal) at different levels (strategic and operational). The extent to which regular bilateral dialogue took place at country level, however, varied considerably (in terms of number and quality of interactions). The evaluation also found that additional efforts could be invested by both partners in creating a stronger bridge between the strategic (HQ) and operational (field) levels, particularly in regard to the flow of information to and from strategic discussions.

The partnership also provided for opportunities to deal with issues hindering cooperation at different levels. For example, at strategic level, the Strategic and High-level meetings provided opportunities to raise issues and agree on potential solutions, and the partners proactively followed up on the progress through regular bilateral monitoring exercises. In the field, formal and/or informal exchanges between country offices, such as the joint monitoring visits, allowed the partners to address issues hindering cooperation.

Despite the above, evidence collected also shows that there is scope to further reinforce mutual cooperation by creating opportunities to discuss more cross-cutting operational issues (e.g. proposals, reporting requirements, etc.) that affect all countries where DG ECHO and UNHCR cooperate.

Almost all DG ECHO and UNHCR staff consulted agreed that over the evaluation period, both partners were committed to the partnership. However, views were diverging as to whether the relationship developed under the partnership further increased this commitment, with UNHCR staff perceiving the effects of the relationship overall as more positive to this extent. Overall, DG ECHO and UNHCR also had a good understating of their respective mandates and roles and the partnership positively contributed to further enhancing this understanding. However, there is also evidence of different understandings/nuances around UNHCR's mandate with regard to IDPs (in connection to the work of other UN agencies) and in sectors other than protection.

The quality of the DG ECHO and UNHCR's humanitarian responses was positively influenced by the funding provide by DG ECHO and the exchange of information between the partners. Overall, DG ECHO-UNHCR cooperation and information exchange under the partnership also contributed to enhancing their respective needs assessments and vulnerability analyses. When it came to targeting strategies, evidence collected shows that more could be done at country level to better align the partners' targeting approaches, as several differences in those were found in all regions.

The DG ECHO-UNHCR partnership had a limited impact on enhanced field and sectoral coordination, which in addition considerably varied across countries. Some of the main factors that influenced the partnership's ability to contribute to improved field and sectoral coordination included: the level of DG ECHO funding to UNHCR's coordination activities; the extent to which DG ECHO shared information on funding to other humanitarian actors with UNHCR (and other Framework partners); UNHCR's coordination role and the quality of their coordination activities; and the quality of the DG ECHO-UNHCR relationship on the ground.

Some examples of ways in which the partnership contributed – at least to some extent – to enhanced field and sectoral coordination in some countries included: DG ECHO's advocacy efforts for the establishment/reinforcement of the cluster system; DG ECHO and UNHCR promotion of the use of multi-sector/multi-agency joint needs assessments; and the funding provided for the development/reinforcement of information management systems to support humanitarian coordination.

When it comes to cooperation towards the Nexus, at strategic level, the partnership had limited impact on DG ECHO and UNHCR cooperation on this aspect. While the EU-UNHCR High-Level and

Strategic Dialogues provided for opportunities to discuss common priorities and objectives and issues related to the Nexus, the type of exchanges and the level of dialogue between the different actors did not directly contribute to fostering a Nexus approach in practice. At operational level, the extent to which the partnership contributed to the Nexus greatly varied across countries and depending on the humanitarian situation and political context. Where cooperation on the Nexus existed, this was mostly in the context of the Humanitarian-Development Nexus. Overall, insufficient communication and dialogue between DG ECHO, UNHCR and other EU services and institutions was highlighted as a limiting factor for the partnership contribution to the Nexus at operational level. The fact that in some countries different UNHCR field staff were responsible for the relationship with different EU Services also hindered cooperation towards the Nexus. Some examples of good practices with regard to DG ECHO-UNHCR cooperation towards the Humanitarian-Development Nexus were also identified (e.g. in Burundi, Syria and Uganda).

### Recommendations

Considering the evaluation findings, the following strategic recommendations are proposed:

- 1. DG ECHO should engage with UNHCR to reinforce existing dialogue opportunities to increase mutual learning at strategic level and to reinforce the link between the strategic and field levels:** DG ECHO should engage with UNHCR to set up a mechanism to identify and act upon lessons learned (ideally for both High-level and Strategic dialogues, every two years), to which other European Commission services would also be invited. DG ECHO should also consider developing a way to further collect/dissemination information with Regional/Country/Field offices, to minimise information gaps between the strategic and operational levels. This could include, for instance, the collection of relevant information informing the High-level and Strategic dialogue from Regional/Country/Field offices through the use of templates mirroring/ informed by the monitoring tables (ideally reflecting action points with a direct connection with operations) and space for additional feedback, or the dissemination of results of High-level and Strategic dialogues via distribution lists to Country and Field offices working directly with UNHCR or internal communication mechanisms.
- 2. DG ECHO should engage with UNHCR to develop further opportunities for operational and cross-cutting dialogue:** to fill the current information-exchange gaps regarding operational and cross-cutting issues, it is recommended that DG ECHO discuss with UNHCR the possibility to establish a shared space for addressing cross-cutting and operational issues outside of the current dialogue opportunities (e.g. in a way similar to the previous Operational dialogue). Operational and cross-cutting issues that could be discussed include: mutual understanding of the approach to advocacy (operational), improvements in reporting and proposals (cross-cutting), ways in which the partnership could further enhance field and sectoral coordination (operational) or opportunities to further enhance cost-efficiency and cost-effectiveness (cross-cutting). In the event that a High-level dialogue is not considered a suitable platform for discussing such issues (given the high-level participants and its emphasis on strategic matters), DG ECHO could discuss with UNHCR the possibility to create such a space for dialogue at regional level, involving relevant officers from Policy and Geographical Units.
- 3. DG ECHO should advocate for a reinforced and more coherent EU strategic dialogue and cooperation with UNHCR, particularly on the operationalisation of the Nexus:** the evaluation found that DG ECHO could play a stronger role towards the further enhancement of the partnership by fostering a more integrated approach towards the operationalisation of the Nexus (with all European Commission services and EEAS/EUDEL working collaboratively to develop and share more coherent messages). It also found differences in how DG ECHO and UNHCR view the work on durable solutions and long-term interventions, and their links with humanitarian aid, in some contexts. Against this background, and to advocate for a reinforced and more coherent EU dialogue and cooperation with UNHCR, it is recommended that DG ECHO engage with other Commission services and EEAS/EUDEL to jointly discuss and develop common messages, strategies and priorities. This could take the form of a working group which would meet once a year (ahead of the EU-UNHCR Strategic dialogue meeting) to: a) develop a comprehensive EU approach to responding

to specific emergencies encompassing both humanitarian and development cycles and addressing how EU emergency, development and peace activities can interlink, and b) further facilitate common understanding and entry points for joint programming/policy development, harmonising or coordinating funding opportunities for UNHCR, particularly “bridging” activities.

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## ***The European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations - ECHO***

### ***ECHO Mission***

The primary role of the Directorate-General for Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (DG ECHO) of the European Commission is to manage and coordinate the European Union's emergency response to conflicts, natural and man-made disasters. It does so both through the delivery of humanitarian aid and through the coordination and facilitation of in-kind assistance, specialist capacities, expertise and intervention teams using the Union Civil Protection Mechanism (UCPM)

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