



## EX-POST EVALUATION OF THE EU AID VOLUNTEERS INITIATIVE, 2014-2020 - EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### *Evaluation subject, scope, timing and purpose*

The European Union commissioned ADE to conduct an independent ex-post evaluation of the European Union Aid Volunteers (EUAV) Initiative for the period 2014 to 2020. This evaluation was undertaken according to the requirements set out in Regulation 375/2014 establishing the EUAV Initiative.

In addition to providing an accountability report for the past activities of the EUAV Initiative, this evaluation looks to the future. It includes findings and recommendations aimed at informing the development of the humanitarian strand of the new European Solidarity Corps, which will be managed by the Directorate General for Education and Culture (DG EAC) and operated by the Education, Audio-visual and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA) as of 2021.

### *Evaluation context*

In 2009, the Lisbon Treaty provided for the establishment of the European Voluntary Humanitarian Aid Corps (EVHAC) with the objective of setting up a “framework for joint contributions from young Europeans to the Humanitarian Aid operations of the Union”. Design work on a European Voluntary Humanitarian Aid Corps started in 2010 and comprised a series of consultations and assessments alongside a pilot phase in the period 2011 to 2013. Following approval of several governing Regulations, the EUAV Initiative was launched in 2014. It was managed by the Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (DG ECHO) and implemented by EACEA. The EUAV Initiative was phased out at the end of 2020 and integrated into the new European Solidarity Corps in January 2021.

It was envisaged that the actions of the EUAV Initiative would be guided by humanitarian aid principles and work in a coherent and complementary manner with the Union’s policies and instruments, notably the humanitarian aid policy, development cooperation policy and the European Union’s Civil Protection Mechanism.

In addition to its overarching aim of contributing to the Union’s capacity to provide needs-based humanitarian aid and strengthening the capacity and resilience of vulnerable or disaster-affected communities in third countries, the **objectives of the EUAV Initiative** were to:

- (i) contribute to increasing and improving the capacity of the Union to provide humanitarian aid;
- (ii) improve the skills, knowledge and competence of volunteers in the field of humanitarian aid, and the terms and conditions of their engagement;
- (iii) build the capacity of hosting organisations and foster volunteering in third countries;
- (iv) communicate the Union's humanitarian aid principles as agreed in the European Consensus on Humanitarian Aid; and
- (v) enhance the coherence and consistency of volunteering across Member States in order to improve opportunities for Union citizens to participate in humanitarian aid activities and operations.

## **Methodology**

The evaluation process was divided into three phases: inception, data collection and synthesis. It was supervised by a Steering Group consisting of EU Commission services.

The evaluation criteria included relevance, coherence, EU added value, effectiveness and efficiency/cost-effectiveness.

A total of 104 individuals were interviewed, drawn from EU staff, Members of the European Parliament, participating agencies, peer volunteering organisations, former volunteers and organisations with a presumed interest in the EUAV Initiative. The evaluation team conducted four surveys with a total of 492 responses: 308 from the volunteer survey, 129 from the hosting organisation (HO) survey, 51 from the sending organisation (SO) survey, and four from the EU Member State representatives' survey. An online Public Consultation was also conducted in line with the EU Better Regulations guidelines, which received 15 responses from NGOs and EU citizens. The research team additionally carried out an extensive desk review of policy and strategy documents, further evaluation reports, reviews, studies and other documents, including an in-depth analysis of a sample of 15 projects.

Most of the main limitations and constraints for the evaluation were anticipated during the inception phase and managed in such a way as to ensure a robust evidence base. This included revising the methodology to incorporate a remote approach due to restrictions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

## **Summary of Findings**

A summary of findings based on the judgement criteria for each of the five evaluation questions appears below.

### **Coherence**

**The EUAV Initiative experienced challenges in aligning with EU humanitarian aid and development initiatives and engaging with peer volunteer networks.** EU Delegation staff were mostly unaware of EUAV-supported activities. There were few direct links with EU-supported humanitarian or development interventions due in large part to security restrictions preventing the deployment of volunteers to areas where DG ECHO was funding interventions.

**Alignment with the EUAV Initiative was much more evident with SOs and HOs** than with EU-supported humanitarian aid and development interventions. This was particularly the case with SOs specialised in volunteer deployments, as their participation in the EUAV Initiative helped to professionalise their management of volunteers and gave them access to a broader and better trained pool of candidates for volunteer deployments.

**There was much less evidence of complementarity with major international volunteer networks outside the EU**, including United Nations Volunteers (UNV), although the EUAV Initiative established informal links with some volunteer networks in EU Member States.

### **EU added value**

**The EUAV Initiative added value by centralising and standardising** systems and processes, which would have been difficult for individual EU Member States to accomplish independently. The EUAV Initiative's efforts to promote EU common standards of volunteering through certification processes fulfilled a key Member State expectation in terms of added value.

**Age was not a barrier** to becoming an EU Volunteer. This was widely viewed as adding significant value compared to many other volunteer programmes in Europe, as it helped ensure that volunteer profiles met the needs of HOs.

**The quality and standard of volunteer training provided by the EUAV Initiative was widely viewed as adding value** in comparison to other volunteering schemes in the EU; training was not, however, always adapted to the different operating environments where volunteers were deployed.

**The consortia approach resulted in increased collaboration and learning** between SOs in different EU Member States. The EUAV Initiative enabled SOs to strengthen their volunteer management competencies and enlarge transnational networks, as well as providing international experience for the first time in many cases.

**The profile of the EUAV Initiative was relatively low in the global volunteer network landscape** due to a combination of the low number of deployments, low visibility, lack of clarity on volunteers' strategic contributions and limited engagement in international volunteer networks.

### Effectiveness

**The EUAV Initiative fell short of its expected contribution to increasing the opportunities for Union citizens to participate in humanitarian actions.** It planned volunteering opportunities for just over a quarter of the original target of 4,000 deployments. Moreover, few of the volunteers were able to engage directly in humanitarian operations; many were engaged in general development activities.

**The EUAV Initiative promoted partnerships with new organisations and volunteers' choice to pursue careers in humanitarian assistance.** The lack of follow-up systems linking volunteers with potential job opportunities limited the EUAV Initiative's contribution to developing EU capacity in relief or development roles. The central training contributed to developing an "*esprit de corps*" among volunteers. Training was perceived as high-quality, but disconnected from the reality of volunteers' deployment activities, with notably too little attention given to "soft skills" and cultural awareness.

**The quality of capacity building and technical assistance contributed to strengthening SO and HO capacities.** The results were mixed in terms of matching volunteer skills and profiles to HO needs. The involvement of the HO combined with the high standard of candidates initially ensured the selection of relevant profiles; delays in the deployment process, however, meant that needs were often no longer relevant. Volunteers deployed to small "grassroots" organisations sometimes proved problematic due to differing expectations.

**The EUAV Initiative ensured EU humanitarian aid principles were communicated to SO and HO volunteers and staff.** The central training included a module on EU humanitarian principles which increased knowledge of this area for 88% of volunteers, according to ADE volunteer survey. SOs and HOs additionally engaged in seminars, workshops and other activities aimed at disseminating EU humanitarian principles. **Communication of EU humanitarian aid principles outside the EUAV Initiative remained limited**, however, with few volunteers engaged in humanitarian aid activities and little interest from EACEA and DG ECHO.

**The EUAV Initiative's contribution to increasing coherence and consistency in volunteering across EU Member States is in line with its limited scale.** The EUAV Initiative ensured that 76 SOs and 298 HOs received training on respecting standards in

volunteering. However, fewer than half of SOs agreed that the EUAV Initiative helped reduce inconsistencies related to international volunteering in EU Member States.

**Certified organisations did not demonstrate a consistent quality of volunteer management**, although the EUAV Initiative did raise standards for small national organisations in particular. This variance was due to two factors: monitoring was principally the responsibility of HOs and SOs, and the general “one-size-fits-all” approach meant that the same systems and restrictions were applied regardless of the capacities and experience of SOs, HOs and volunteers.

**Security restrictions also limited the achievement of the EUAV Initiative’s objectives.** The combination of provisions in the regulations preventing volunteers from being deployed to conflict zones and an additional security management system managed by DG ECHO at headquarters level meant volunteers were rarely directly involved in humanitarian interventions.

## Efficiency

**Appropriateness of budget.** Due in large part to delays in starting up the EUAV Initiative, lack of funding was not a particular constraint for implementation. By 2019, 30% of available funds had not been used. The budget was set at an activity level rather than at any type of outcome level. Budgets therefore could not clearly be linked back to the five stated objectives for the EUAV Initiative.

**Procedural requirements.** Despite some positive effects, the complexity and lack of flexibility resulting from overly detailed and prescriptive EU regulations were detrimental to the cost-effectiveness of the EUAV Initiative. The guidance documents developed by the EUAV Initiative were not adequate for organisations to deal with the complex requirements involved. The complex procedural requirements mainly affected consortia with less-experienced SOs and small local HOs.

**Monitoring** of the EUAV Initiative did not fully utilise the monitoring and evaluation (M&E) framework developed for the EUAV Initiative. Monitoring of activities focused on outputs only, and not on quality and outcomes. Feedback from SOs and HOs was taken into account where possible and led to some corrective measures being taken. SOs and HOs highlighted the need for formal peer learning and knowledge-sharing activities to contribute to improving efficiency and cost-effectiveness, for example by disseminating good practices in management.

**Cost effectiveness.** The costs of deployment projects compared favourably with other volunteering schemes. Based on a subsample of deployment projects, it cost the EUAV Initiative on average EUR 3,180 to deploy a volunteer for a month, whereas each deployment of the international United Nations Volunteers programme costs EUR 4,360. A number of obstacles limited the cost-effectiveness of deployment projects at times, including the length of time between selection and deployment of volunteers, a mismatch between volunteers’ skills and the needs in the field and a lack of HO capacity in some instances. Limited information on the outputs and outcomes of technical assistance (TA) or capacity building (CB) activities makes it difficult to reach a conclusion on their overall cost-effectiveness. The actual costs per organisation engaged in TA/CB interventions was lower than anticipated, which suggests that some attention has been given to cost-efficiency considerations.

## Relevance

The objectives of the EUAV Initiative were in general relevant to the needs of volunteers, HOs and SOs, and were relevant to some extent to the needs of local communities. The actions identified in the Regulation were appropriate to address the objectives as shown below.

However, in some cases the actions identified, including fostering local volunteering, promoting the coherence of volunteering across member states and communicating humanitarian principles, highlight specific weaknesses in the design.

- **Objective 1:** The design of the Initiative was appropriate to contribute to increasing the capacity of the Union to deliver humanitarian aid by improving the capacity of existing DG ECHO implementing partners, by enabling new organisations working in the humanitarian sector to apply for DG ECHO and EU funding, and by increasing the number of skilled volunteers participating in EU humanitarian work. However, the security management system put in place limited deployments of volunteers to areas with the greatest humanitarian need.
- **Objective 2:** The design was appropriate for improving the knowledge, skills and competencies of volunteers in the field of humanitarian aid through its focus on high-quality training and the deployment opportunities it offered. The objective was relevant both for volunteers and for participating organisations.
- **Objective 3:** The design was appropriate for achieving the objective of improving the capacity of HOs but provided insufficient mechanisms for fostering local volunteering.
- **Objective 4:** The design was appropriate for increasing the knowledge of humanitarian principles for volunteers and participating organisations but did not allow for the promotion of these principles to indirect beneficiaries, including local populations and organisations.
- **Objective 5:** The design of the EUAV Initiative was relevant to promote the coherence and consistency of volunteering across Member States to a limited extent only. The focus of the EUAV Initiative at organisational level rather than state or inter-state level, and the lack of a comprehensive oversight system, limited the capacity of the EUAV Initiative to contribute to this objective.

**The simultaneous pursuit of these five quite different and broad objectives created a degree of a competition for resources** which may have constrained progress. However, it also enabled a more holistic approach to improving EU volunteering in the humanitarian aid sector. Progress in each individual objective complemented and reinforced progress in the other objectives, enabling different challenges in EU volunteering in the humanitarian sector to be addressed.

Although the EUAV Initiative was relevant to the specific needs it sought to address in order to improve EU volunteering in the humanitarian sector, its relevance to the broader needs of the humanitarian aid sector in general was more limited. The EUAV Initiative did not incorporate sufficient formal mechanisms in its design to facilitate learning, knowledge-sharing and the use of lessons learned. With the notable exception of SO consortia, lessons were mostly learned in an individual rather than collective manner and were shared through informal, ad hoc and spontaneous channels with limited outreach.

### ***Summary of conclusions and recommendations***

A concise summary of the conclusions and recommendations appear below. The complete versions are listed at the end of this report.

#### **On the results obtained**

**Conclusion 1:** The EUAV Initiative has significantly improved the capacities of SOs and HOs and has created a pool of well-trained and highly skilled volunteers in the field of humanitarian assistance.

**Conclusion 2:** The EUAV Initiative has contributed to increasing the capacity of the EU to deliver humanitarian aid by building the capacity of its partners, promoting the harmonisation of standards, fostering new partnerships and enabling the deployment of trained EU volunteers. However, this contribution remained limited and for the most part short-term for reasons linked to the design and implementation of the EUAV Initiative.

**Conclusion 3:** The EUAV Initiative contributed to strengthening the consistency and coherence of volunteering across participating SOs despite certain discrepancies in the implementation of standards. However, its contribution to encouraging a broader coherence across Member States was more limited.

**Conclusion 4:** The EUAV Initiative contributed to the promotion of EU humanitarian principles across direct beneficiaries but did not succeed in a broader dissemination of these humanitarian principles.

**Conclusion 5:** The EUAV Initiative contributed to localisation, but only in a marginal way in fostering local volunteering, despite this being an objective. This is largely due to the absence of a clear strategy to foster local volunteering under the EUAV Initiative.

### ***On coherence and EU added value***

**Conclusion 6:** The work of the EUAV Initiative was not sufficiently integrated in the broader humanitarian aid and development work of the EU. Complementarities and opportunities for synergies with other EU activities as well as peer-volunteering schemes were not sufficiently explored.

**Conclusion 7:** The undertaking of the EUAV Initiative at the EU level was a source of added value due to the EUAV Initiative's centralised and transnational character, its greater capacity to mobilise resources, and its know-how in terms of training and deployment of volunteers in third countries. The Commission and DG ECHO have not, however, fully drawn on their specific role and global presence to create additional value.

### ***On implementation and cost effectiveness***

**Conclusion 8:** The EUAV Initiative prepared quality reference documents that were useful for implementation of the EUAV Initiative. Implementation was hampered, however, by a heavy administrative burden and procedural requirements.

**Conclusion 9:** The budget was not a constraining factor for the implementation of the EUAV Initiative, given that only 62% of the EUR 115 million available was used until 2019. This is due, among other reasons, to delays in implementation and slow take-up from partners at the start of the EUAV Initiative. The rationale of the budget allocation, however, was unclear and was not set against specific objectives. At the project level, the budget allocation was also sufficient overall, notably after some adjustments to budget restrictions.

**Conclusion 10:** The average cost of deploying volunteers was comparable to that of other volunteering schemes. Several obstacles limited the cost-effectiveness of volunteers' deployment, however, suggesting that there is room for improvement.

**Conclusion 11:** The overall management of the EUAV Initiative, notably through its placement within EACEA, was cost-effective. The operational costs provisioned for administering the EUAV Initiative were comparable to the overhead for grant recipients under EU-funded projects and certain UN agencies.

**Conclusion 12:** The EUAV Initiative was based on a good monitoring and evaluation framework, but in practice monitoring results were limited.

### ***On relevance and design***

**Conclusion 13:** The security management system successfully guaranteed the security of volunteers and limited the reputational risk of the EU. However, it also impacted the relevance and effectiveness of the interventions, as the EUAV Initiative limited engagement with organisations that were providing humanitarian assistance in risk zones, where volunteers could not directly contribute to the needs of the populations.

**Conclusion 14:** The EUAV Initiative adequately fitted the need to improve EU volunteering in the humanitarian field through a holistic approach. It pursued different complementary objectives of enhancing the capacities of volunteers and sending and hosting organisations and favouring the coherence and consistency of volunteering across Member States. The EUAV Initiative however assumed the relevance of the volunteering objective itself. It was not clear enough on why volunteering is important in a humanitarian context and why it should be pursued. It was also not clear enough on the hierarchy of the different objectives pursued.

**Conclusion 15:** The EUAV Initiative was characterised by a lack of contingency planning and a rigidity of regulations that limited its ability to adapt to changing contexts and hampered its effectiveness at times of crisis, including during the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Conclusion 16:** The design of the EUAV Initiative treated volunteers, SOs and HOs as homogenous groups and did not sufficiently consider their differing profiles and needs. This has hampered the effectiveness and efficiency of the EUAV Initiative.

### **Recommendations**

The summary recommendations below are targeted at the European Voluntary Humanitarian Aid Corps (hereafter referred to as “the HumAid Corps”) that will replace of the EUAV Initiative starting from 2021. The complete recommendations appear at the end of this report.

**R1 Improve the design of the HumAid Corps by clarifying its overall rationale:** the objectives it pursues, the relation between these objectives and their prioritisation. The design should also clearly establish why the HumAid Corps is the best option to achieve each objective pursued, and how and to what extent it should contribute to each objective.

**R2 Improve the effectiveness and efficiency of the HumAid Corps through the development of a suitable European Commission “toolkit”** of mechanisms and tools adapted to the different categories of SOs and HOs; the different levels of needs of volunteers; and the diversity of volunteer roles and operating contexts during deployments.

**R3 Re-examine the European Commission security management system** to ensure that it allows for both risk management and the attainment of objectives relating to humanitarian action.

**R4 Strengthen HumAid Corps localisation efforts**, fostering local volunteering in particular by integrating it more systematically in the design of the HumAid Corps.

**R5 Clarify the budget rationale and develop budgetary measures that promote cost-effectiveness.**

**R6 Enhance communication and coordination with other EU humanitarian aid and development stakeholders**, as well as with peer volunteer networks such as UNV and Member States schemes.

**R7 Reinforce communication activities to improve the visibility and appreciation** of the HumAid Corps among European citizens, potential SOs and other EU stakeholders in the humanitarian sector.

**R8 Apply appropriate monitoring and evaluation system** and ensure adequate mechanisms are in place to promote peer learning and knowledge-sharing amongst all stakeholders.