European Commission

EVALUATION OF DG ECHO'S PARTNERSHIP WITH UNHCR (2017-2021)

PURPOSE & SCOPE
METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH
DG ECHO UNHCR PARTNERSHIP
KEY FINDINGS & RECOMMENDATIONS
THEMATIC CASE STUDIES
THEORY OF CHANGE

The combined evaluation, its purpose and scope

In August 2022, the European Commission's Directorate-General for Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid (DG ECHO) launched the Combined evaluation of the European Union'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 work was undertaken by ICF in collaboration with local researchers in Colombia (Econometría), Grupo Faro (Ecuador) and Delphos (Venezuela), with inputs from humanitarian aid experts. The final report was approved in August 2023.

The combined evaluation sought to provide an independent and retrospective assessment of both its components:

DG ECHO's response to the Venezuelan regional crisis (2017-2021).

Evaluation of DG ECHO's partnership with UNHCR (2017-2021). It covered all DG ECHO-funded activities in Venezuela (to address the internal dimension of the crisis) and in neighbouring countries hosting refugees and migrants from Venezuela (external dimension of the crisis) during the evaluation period. It covered all sectors.

DG ECHO's partnership with UNHCR (2017-2021).

DG ECHO's partnership with UNHCR (2017-2021). It considered the strategic and operational partnership between DG ECHO and UNHCR at global level, focusing on identifying lessons learned.

This interactive PDF provides a summary overview of the approach, key findings and recommendations as regards the first component of the evaluation:

DG ECHO's partnership with UNHCR (2017-2022).

Methodological approach

The evaluation was a traditional ex-post, theory-based evaluation underpinned by an **evaluation framework** structured around six evaluation questions covering three evaluation criteria (coherence, efficiency and effectiveness) and a **Theory of Change** describing the key elements of the partnership, (external and internal) factors affecting it, and assumptions regarding the links between the key elements.
The evaluation was informed by primary and secondary evidence collected through a variety of methods:

Desk-based research:

- In-depth review of 260 ***documents*** (for both evaluation components)
- Analysis of the entire ***portfolio of actions*** funded by DG ECHO in response to the crisis (80 actions)
- Review of ***project documentation***, including detailed analysis for a sample of actions (40 actions)

Stakeholder consultations:

- Online survey for DG ECHO and UNHCR (HQ and Field) staff (43 responses: 22 from DG ECHO and 21 from UNHCR)
- 25 key informant interviews with DG ECHO and UNHCR officials (HQ and Field/Regional Offices), other EU institutions and other donors

Along with drawing evidence from the four ***field missions*** conducted as part of Part A of the evaluation, the team also carried out dedicated field missions in three countries. Field evidence was used to inform ***two thematic case studies*** analysing: the partnership's contribution to enhanced field and sectoral coordination and needs-based protection responses

Go to Case Studies

	Part B: DG ECHO's partnership with UNHCR			***Part A:*** DG ECHO's response to Venezuelan regional crisis		
	Chad (in-country)	***Jordan*** (in-country)	***Bangladesh*** (remote)	***Colombia*** (in-country)	***Ecuador*** (in-country)	***Panama*** (remote)
The partnership contribution to enhanced field and sectoral coordination	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
The partnership contribution to enhanced needs-based protection responses	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	

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DG ECHO UNHCR Partnership

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.
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.

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 in particular funded a total of 136 UNHCR projects during the evaluation period (amounting to EUR 912 million).

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.

Figure 1: DG ECHO funding to UNHCR (in EUR and number of projects funded)

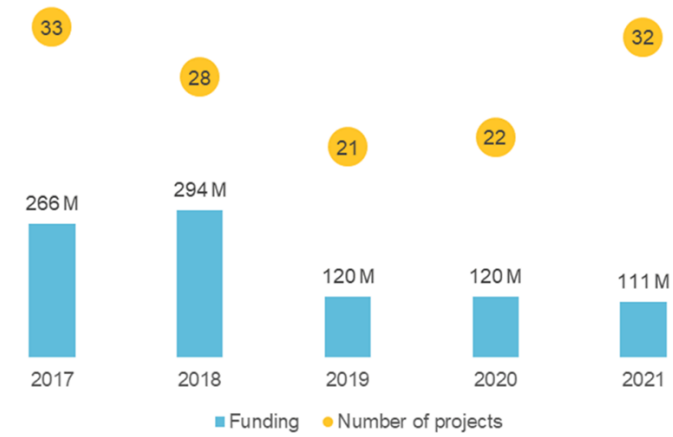
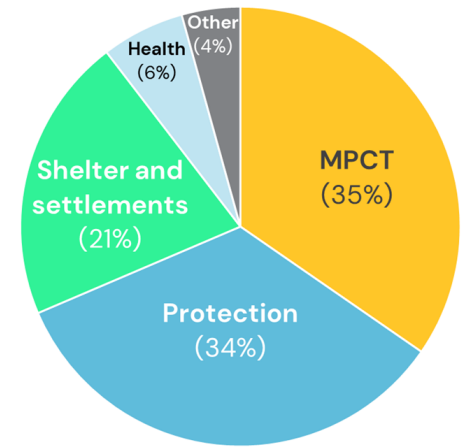


Figure 2: DG ECHO funding to UNHCR (per sector)



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Key findings and recommendations

Coherence: DG ECHO and UNHCR showed a high degree of complementarity in their mandates and alignment in their strategic priorities and objectives with respect to protection, but some differences in the way that these translated into the operational level were identified. The partners were also well aligned in their approaches to needs assessments, vulnerability and risk analyses as well as targeting strategies and advocacy priorities, although some discrepancies and/or quality issues were identified in certain contexts.

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Efficiency: Opportunities for efficiency gains were discussed and identified at various levels, but the impact of these discussions was limited. The partnership did not significantly reduce management-related costs and its contribution to cost-effectiveness varied across countries and projects, although generally strategic dialogues had limited influence.

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Effectiveness: The strategic partnership between DG ECHO and UNHCR enhanced cooperation, particularly through High-level and Strategic Dialogue meetings, but there's room to improve information flow between strategic and operational levels and discuss cross-cutting operational issues. The partnership allowed the partners to further enhance understanding of their respective mandates, but differing views as to whether the relationship developed under partnership increased the level of commitment were expressed. The partnership also contributed to enhanced quality of the partners' humanitarian responses, their needs assessments and vulnerability analyses, even if room for further alignment in targeting strategies was found. In contrast, it had a limited impact on field and sectoral coordination, which varied across countries, although some examples of a positive impact were identified.

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Recommendations: To further strengthen the future response, DG ECHO should:

1. 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.
2. Engage with UNHCR to develop further opportunities for operational and cross-cutting dialogue.
3. Advocate for a reinforced and more coherent EU strategic dialogue and cooperation with UNHCR, particularly on the operationalisation of the Nexus.

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Coherence

DG ECHO and UNHCR showed a high degree of complementarity in their mandates and alignment in their strategic priorities and objectives with respect to protection, but some differences in the way that these translated into the operational level were identified. The partners had a somewhat different understanding of what protection entails at operational level. The partners demonstrated alignment in strategic priorities, focusing on safeguarding individuals facing forced displacement, responding to the needs of those displaced by disasters and climate change, and minimising the environmental impact of humanitarian aid. Common goals were also evident in the Grand Bargain commitments and cross-cutting issues like coordination and the Triple Nexus. Operational priorities showed good alignment but varied by country, with distinctions in sector prioritisation, transfer modalities, and views on durable solutions and long-term interventions.

The partners were also well aligned in their approaches to needs assessments, vulnerability and risk analyses as well as targeting strategies and advocacy priorities, although some discrepancies and/or quality issues were identified in certain contexts. Consistency in approaches to needs assessments, vulnerability, and risk analysis was generally observed, yet operational-level variations existed, affecting the quality and alignment of these analyses with DG ECHO's requirements. Targeting strategies, advocacy priorities at global and country levels, and communication efforts demonstrated a general alignment, but some discrepancies were noted in specific contexts, revealing areas for improvement in disseminating communication materials and ensuring field visibility.

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Efficiency

Opportunities for efficiency gains were discussed and identified at various levels, but the impact of these discussions was limited. Discussions between the partners were mostly focused on other considerations, but they allowed to identify and discuss efficiency gains, but their operational impact was limited. This was mostly due challenges such as a lack of detailed and timely information on projects, UNHCR's limited flexibility to incorporate DG ECHO's recommendations, and misalignments in timelines.

The partnership did not significantly reduce management-related costs and its contribution to cost-effectiveness varied across countries and projects, although generally strategic dialogues had limited influence. The partners had differing views on reporting requirements, with DG ECHO suggesting room for improvement in UNHCR reporting and UNHCR considering that DG ECHO's requirements too heavy and cumbersome compared to other donors. The partners also had differing views on the impact of the partnership on cost-effectiveness and timeliness. While UNHCR presented a more positive assessment, DG ECHO indicated a limited impact, though some positive examples were acknowledged, such as UNHCR's expertise addressing certain crises and joint work on cash programs.

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Effectiveness

The strategic partnership approach contributed to improving cooperation between DG ECHO and UNHCR, particularly through discussions held during High-level and Strategic Dialogue meetings and regular formal and informal dialogues at various levels. Strategic and High-level meetings, for instance, provided opportunities to deal with issues hindering cooperation at different levels. However, the evaluation identified room for better information flow between the strategic (HQ) and operational (field) levels around the strategic discussions, and scope to further reinforce mutual cooperation by creating opportunities to discuss more cross-cutting operational issues.

Despite overall commitment to the partnership among DG ECHO and UNHCR staff, views on whether the relationship increased commitment varied, with UNHCR staff perceiving more positive effects. The partnership positively contributed to understanding respective mandates, but nuanced differences arose, particularly regarding UNHCR's mandate related to IDPs and sectors beyond protection.

The quality of the partners' responses, as well as their needs assessments and vulnerability analyses, were positively influenced by the funding provided by DG ECHO and the exchange of information between the partners. However, there is a need for better alignment in targeting strategies at the country level. The impact of the partnership on field and sectoral coordination was limited and varied across countries, influenced by factors like DG ECHO funding levels, information sharing, UNHCR's coordination role, and the overall relationship on the ground. While the partnership contributed, to some extent, to enhanced coordination through advocacy efforts and funding support, it had limited impact on fostering a Nexus approach at strategic and operational levels. Communication gaps between DG ECHO, UNHCR, and other EU services hindered operational-level Nexus contributions, but some good practices were identified in specific countries such as Burundi, Syria, and Uganda.

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Recommendations

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 (for both High-level and Strategic dialogues), to which other European Commission services would be invited. DG ECHO should also consider developing a way to further collect and disseminate information with Regional/Country/Field offices, to minimise information gaps between the strategic and operational level (using templates to collect information or dissemination via distribution lists or internal communication mechanisms).

Engage with UNHCR to develop further opportunities for operational and cross-cutting dialogue. To fill existing information-exchange gaps on operational and cross-cutting issues, DG ECHO and UNHCR should explore the possibility of establishing a shared space outside current dialogue opportunities, similar to the previous Operational dialogue. Alternatively, a regional-level dialogue involving relevant Policy and Geographical units could be considered.

Advocate for a reinforced and more coherent EU strategic dialogue and cooperation with UNHCR, particularly on the operationalisation of the Nexus. DG ECHO could play a stronger role towards further enhancement of the partnership by promoting a more integrated approach to operationalising the Nexus, collaborating with all European Commission services and EEAS/EUDEL to develop coherent messages. To address differences in views on durable solutions and long-term interventions, and advocate for a more cohesive EU-UNHCR dialogue, DG ECHO should engage with other Commission services and EEAS/EUDEL to jointly discuss common messages, strategies and priorities (e.g., through a working group that meets ahead of EU-UNHCR Strategic dialogue meetings to agree on the EU approach)

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THEMATIC CASE STUDIES

The partnership contribution to enhanced field and sectoral coordination

Objective, scope and methodological approach: To assess the extent to which the partnership – and its evolution over the evaluation period – enhanced field coordination – between DG ECHO and UNHCR, but also implementing partners, other humanitarian actors and donors – and sectoral coordination at regional and country level. It also explored whether the partnership contributed to improved cooperation between DG ECHO/UNHCR Regional and Country offices. The case study primarily relied on evidence gathered during the field missions in Jordan and Chad, and the remote mission in Bangladesh, also drawing support gathered in Venezuela, Colombia and Ecuador. The field missions entailed:

- Field interviews with DG ECHO and UNHCR field staff, local implementing partners, national authorities and other humanitarian actors.
- Visits to selected DG ECHO-funded actions implemented by UNHCR and its local implementing partners.

Findings

Relevance: The case study explored the degree of alignment between DG ECHO and UNHCR in their approaches to needs assessments in the countries covered, finding that it was overall aligned in all funded sectors and that DG ECHO and UNHCR actively exchanged information and openly discussed potential issues. Both partners also promoted the use of multi-sector/multi-agency joint needs assessments, which they deemed to facilitate a coordinated approach towards the definition of a comprehensive response. Field evidence also showed that DG ECHO regularly reviewed the needs assessment data provided by UNHCR in its proposals and provided feedback and recommendation on specific issues.

Effectiveness: Field evidence did not allow for an assessment of the direct contribution of the partnership to reinforced and enhanced sectoral coordination (regional and country/field level), but cooperation between DG ECHO and UNHCR was deemed overall as positive and a limited contribution of the partnership to improved field coordination (particularly with other humanitarian actors) was found in some countries. DG ECHO's support to UNHCR's lead or co-lead role in the cluster coordination system was also limited in countries covered, although there were exceptions (e.g., single funding initiatives in some countries).

The case study attempted to identify lessons learned from coordination between DG ECHO and UNHCR Regional and National offices, (in terms of priorities, compliance with requirements and obligations, information sharing, respect for each other mandates, etc.), but this was not possibly mostly due to a generally limited in-depth knowledge of the coordination mechanisms between the two partners. Field evidence suggested improvements as regards compliance with requirements and obligations, as well as information sharing, but issues with UNHCR's compliance with DG ECHO's requirements were reported in at least ***two countries.***

The partnership contribution to enhanced needs-based protection responses

Objective, scope and methodological approach: To explore whether and how the DG ECHO-UNHCR partnership contributed to enhanced needs-based protection responses, focusing on the protection provided to refugees and displaced persons in various regions (e.g. Venezuelan refugees in the LAC region, Syrian refugees in Middle Eastern countries, Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh and Sudanese and Central African refugees, as well as IDPs, in Chad). The case study primarily relied on evidence gathered during the field missions in Jordan and Chad, and the remote mission in Bangladesh, also drawing support gathered in Venezuela, Colombia and Ecuador. The field missions entailed:

- Field interviews with DG ECHO and UNHCR field staff, local implementing partners, national authorities and other humanitarian actors.
- Visits to selected DG ECHO-funded actions implemented by UNHCR and its local implementing partners.

Findings

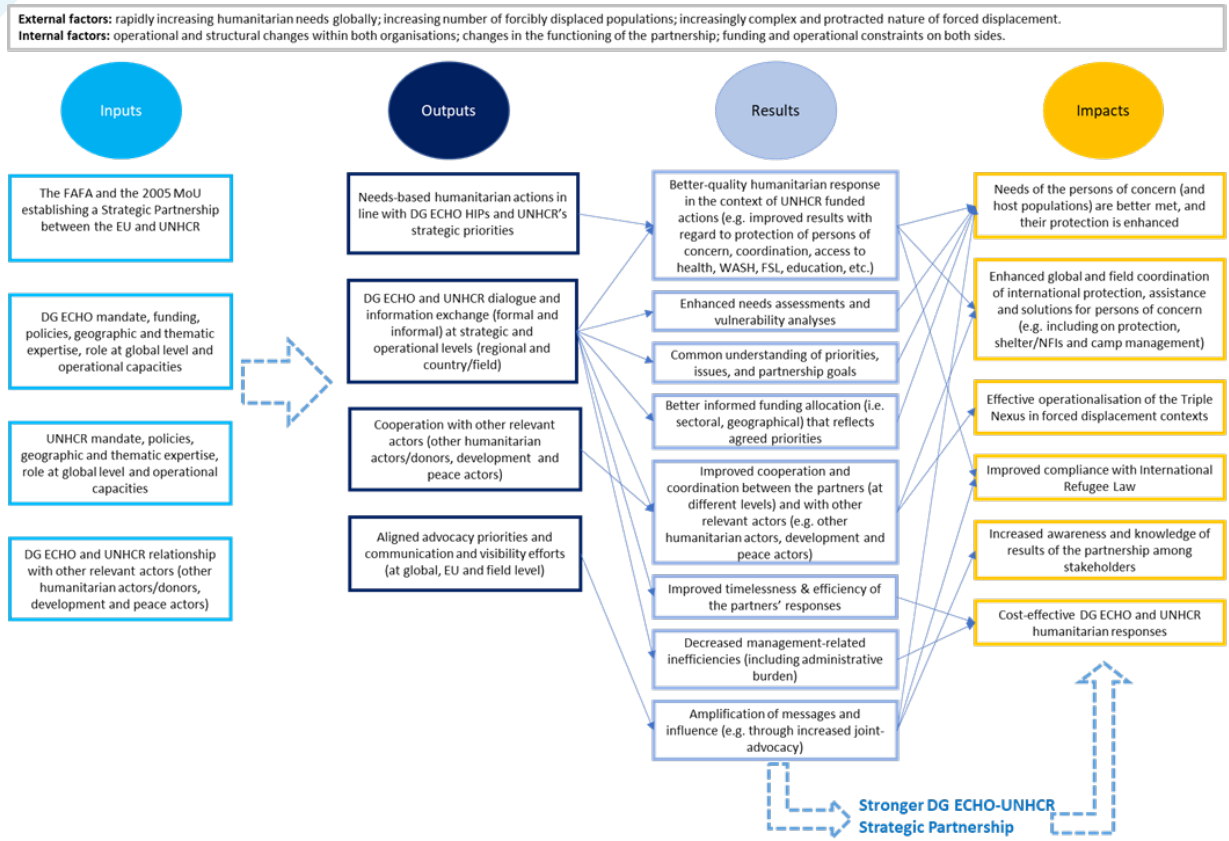
Coherence: The case study explored whether DG ECHO and UNHCR have a common understanding of protection (concept, activities, and how to measure their results), revealing some differences in the way that DG ECHO and UNHCR understand what protection encompasses at operational level. While the two partners have a common understanding of ***"core" protection needs and activities,*** UNHCR's understanding of protection goes beyond and also covers assistance. These differences were discussed at strategic level (e.g., during EU-UNHCR Strategic and High-level Dialogues), but field consultations revealed that more regular field-level discussions on protection needs could be beneficial. In some contexts, some misalignment in protection priorities and how they should be addressed were also identified. Significant discrepancies in the way that partners measured and reported on protection activities were identified as well.

As regards approaches to assess needs and vulnerabilities in the protection sector, the case study found that DG ECHO and UNHCR used similar approaches for protection risk analysis. The field visits did not show any significant discrepancies in the way that DG ECHO and UNHCR approached needs assessments and vulnerability analysis; while the degree of alignment with DG ECHO's requirements varied from country to country, field evidence showed overall satisfaction among DG ECHO staff with the quality of needs assessment, although some suggestions for further improvement were made in some countries visited. Partners were also largely aligned in their strategies in all countries covered, but examples of differences between the partners were identified in ***four countries***. There was no evidence that the DG ECHO-UNHCR partnership contributed to enhancing alignment between the partners' approaches to needs assessments and vulnerability analyses in the protection sector in any of the countries visited.

Effectiveness: The case study also attempted to analyse the extent to which the partnership influenced protection principles, priorities and approaches followed by other humanitarian actors and donors. Overall, there was little awareness of the specificities of the DG ECHO-UNHCR partnership among humanitarian actors in the field, and field missions did not generate any evidence that the partnership had any influence in this area. Despite this, some joint (DG ECHO-UNHCR) advocacy efforts were found to have amplified protection messages and raising awareness on existing protection needs, and UNHCR and DG ECHO staff consulted agreed that the partnership (primarily through funding to ***core protection activities***) enhanced the quality of the overall humanitarian protection response.

THEORY OF CHANGE

Zoom in to view the Theory of Change more clearly.



Assumptions to be tested (outputs >> results)

- DG ECHO and UNHCR have sufficient operational and financial capacity to fulfil the ambitions of the partnership;
- DG ECHO -UNHCR partnership is unique (not just donor-partner) and institutionalised, rather than based on specific individuals (rooted in long term collaboration, tradition and a strategic partnership approach);
- The partners understand and respect each other's mandates and roles;
- There is an alignment in terms of strategies, objectives, mandate, needs assessments, and vulnerability analyses, advocacy priorities, communication campaigns and visibility efforts;
- There is timely and efficient dialogue and information sharing which brought a positive impact on the focus of funding trends, strategic and operational activities and reduction of management-related costs;
- Outcomes of existing dialogue are adequately disseminated/passed on across different levels of both organisations and to UNHCR local Implementing partners (where relevant);
- UNHCR ensures that its local Implementing partners understand and carry out their activities in line with what is agreed in the framework of the partnership;
- The partnership (i.e. dialogue, information exchange and funding) positively impacted the quality of humanitarian responses
- Operational and structural changes within both organisations did not negatively impact the partnership;
- Changes in the functioning of the partnership over the years had a positive impact on its operationalisation;
- The partners effectively leverage their respective relationships with other relevant actors (other humanitarian actors/donors, development and peace actors)

Assumptions to be tested (results >> impacts)

- UNHCR funded actions are effectively implemented
- UNHCR and DG ECHO have a strong influence on field and sectoral coordination
- DG ECHO and UNHCR actively cooperate with other humanitarian actors and development/peace actors to operationalise the Nexus
- Advocacy, communication and visibility efforts are well-targeted