

# **Evaluation of European Union's humanitarian assistance in Syria, 2016-2018**

Executive Summary

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# Executive Summary

The Directorate General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid (DG ECHO) of the European Union (EU) has been responding to the Syria crisis since the start of the conflict. DG ECHO provides humanitarian assistance through its annual Humanitarian Implementation Plans (HIP) which define the expected humanitarian response in the country based on Humanitarian Aid Regulation (HAR) No. EC 1257/96 and the European Consensus on Humanitarian Aid. DG ECHO commissioned Landell Mills International to undertake an independent evaluation of its humanitarian assistance inside Syria for the HIP period 2016–2018. The evaluation was undertaken between January and December 2020. The following is a summary of the evaluation and its findings.

## Evaluation purpose, scope and objectives

The overall purpose of the evaluation was to provide an external, impartial and independent evidence-based assessment of performance of the DG ECHO's portfolio of funded actions in Syria. The scope of the evaluation covered humanitarian actions inside Syria under the HIPs for 2016 to 2018<sup>1</sup>. The evaluation sought to understand the extent to which support provided by DG ECHO contributed to meeting the needs of the most vulnerable groups caught up in the ongoing conflict inside Syria. In doing so, the evaluation covered actions in the areas of protection; food; basic needs; education; healthcare; cash transfers; shelter; water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH), as well as in the areas of coordination, support to operations and logistics.

### The evaluation had three objectives<sup>2</sup>:

1. Examine the intervention logic of DG ECHO's portfolio of actions in Syria and analyse the portfolio of actions for the 2016-2018 HIP period.
2. Assess performance with regard to DG ECHO humanitarian actions, including identifying internal and external enabling factors, and limiting factors in delivery of its mandate in relation to assistance and protection to people affected by the conflict.
3. Capture lessons, good practices and innovations that are improving humanitarian action and analyse their potential for more general application by DG ECHO.

The evaluation assessed DG ECHO's strategy and priorities in Syria, taking into consideration internal and external enabling factors, using the following evaluation criteria: relevance, coherence, EU added-value, effectiveness, efficiency and sustainability. The primary users of the evaluation include DG ECHO staff at the headquarters (HQ), regional and country level staff, other EU actors, implementing partners (IP) and other humanitarian donors, including EU Member States and agencies. Secondary stakeholders include all other humanitarian agencies, EU citizens and any other persons and organisations who may be interested in or may find lessons emerging from this evaluation of direct or indirect interest.

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<sup>1</sup> Implementation of some of the actions from HIP 2018 continued well into late-2019/early 2020 and these were also included in the evaluation.

<sup>2</sup> DG ECHO (2019). Terms of Reference for the evaluation of the European Union's humanitarian assistance in Syria, 2016-2018

## Overview of the humanitarian context and DG ECHO response

With the conflict into its tenth year, both the severity and complexity of humanitarian needs of Syrians remain widespread. The escalation in violence in the latter part of 2019 further exacerbated existing humanitarian needs and vulnerability, and the crisis continues to cause civilian deaths and strain the socio-economic foundations of Syrian people. The acute humanitarian needs, recurrent displacement and continuous violence have deepened poverty, increased insecurity and weakened communities' resilience to cope with internal and external shocks. The impact of current and past hostilities on civilians remains the principal driver of humanitarian needs in Syria. The divided territorial control between different warring sides has impacted access and shaped humanitarian response in the country since the onset of the conflict. Ongoing hostilities in parts of the country expose civilian populations to continuing violence and threats to their lives, particularly in the North-West,<sup>3</sup> raising complex protection issues. The threat of explosive hazards, the effects of hostilities, forced and protracted displacement, lack or loss of civil documentation, barriers to claims on housing, land and property rights and lack of freedom of movement remain the main protection issues in Syria. Gender-based violence (GBV) continues to affect the lives of women and girls, with adolescent girls, women-headed households - especially those divorced and widowed - bearing the brunt of the crisis. Elderly people and persons living with disabilities are also among the most vulnerable requiring protection<sup>4</sup>.

The protracted nature of the crisis and the prolonged displacement of millions of people has destroyed livelihoods, eroded safety nets and generated harmful coping mechanisms such as early marriage, child labour, and other forms of exploitation among a large section of the population. Unemployment is at 55 percent<sup>5</sup>. Over two-fifths of school infrastructure has been damaged or destroyed. Basic water and sanitation services are lacking. The prevalence of life-threatening diseases has increased, with children, pregnant and lactating women, disabled people, and the elderly at increased risk.

The humanitarian community is responding to the needs of the affected population by providing food and shelter assistance as well as health, education, nutrition, protection, and WASH services. The international humanitarian response during the evaluation period has been coordinated under the framework of the UN-led Whole of Syria (WoS) approach, which brings together internally and externally coordinated operations under a single umbrella. DG ECHO was one of the largest humanitarian donors in the Syria response: between 2016 and 2018, it was consistently the fourth largest donor to the Syria Crisis, providing between 7% and 12% of the total appeal funding, with an overall spend of €442,392,821 during the period.

## The evaluation methods and ethics

The evaluation used a mixed-methods approach combining desk research, key informant interviews (KIIs) and beneficiary/community interviews. The mixed methods involved gathering primary and secondary data from a representative sample of projects supported through the HIPs. During the desk review phase, the evaluation team (ET) reviewed various policy and thematic documents and project files related to actions supported during the evaluation period. The selection of key informants (DG ECHO and IP staff, other

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<sup>3</sup> OCHA (2019). Humanitarian Response. Syrian Arab Republic: Humanitarian Response plan Monitoring Report, January-May 2019

<sup>4</sup> Extracted from the Humanitarian Needs Overview for the years 2017 and 2018.

<sup>5</sup> OCHA (2019). Humanitarian Needs Overview 2019, Syrian Arab Republic, March 2019

humanitarian partners) was done in a way that ensured that the ET covered the humanitarian response in all the three hubs/sub-regions (North-East, North-West and Central/South-Central) inside Syria. In total, 78 KIIs were conducted with staff from 26 IPs, seven humanitarian donor agencies and the EU. A beneficiary survey of ECHO-assisted activities implemented by a sample of IPs was conducted. Additionally, a team of enumerators administered a survey to frontline staff/volunteers (working directly with communities) of local NGOs/organisations that are *cooperating partners* of the IPs and to a number of local council members/community leaders. In total, 470 beneficiaries/community members who received assistance and 41 frontline staff responded to the survey.

The evaluation adhered to ethical principles of independence and impartiality of the evaluators; avoiding harm to participants; voluntary participation; informed consent of participants; ensuring confidentiality.

A limitation of the evaluation was that due to the Covid-19 pandemic, core members of the ET were unable to visit Syria, and hence most of the data collection was undertaken remotely through phone interviews and desk reviews, except for a part of the beneficiary survey and frontline staff survey undertaken by a team of local enumerators. Most of the beneficiary survey was also undertaken remotely to minimise any risks to participants due to the pandemic. This lack of direct observation which is normally possible during field visits was counterbalanced to a significant extent by the extensive number of KIIs, beneficiary survey and interviews with frontline staff involved in delivery of humanitarian response at community level.

## Evaluation findings

### Relevance of DG ECHO Actions

DG ECHO is recognised for its flexible approach in humanitarian programming and support to partners to provide timely and appropriate response, encouraging partners to undertake continuous review of needs and adjust funds within projects as needs emerge. DG ECHO used a range of operational modalities and operating procedures to enable access in hard-to-reach populations for providing life-saving aid. Targeting the most vulnerable people has received strong attention in DG ECHO monitoring of IP actions and, where necessary, partners were encouraged to take remedial action based on a continuous review of needs. Given that direct and regular interactions with communities for most IPs had been challenged by access issues, agencies have put in place some form of complaints response mechanism (CRM), though their use and effectiveness have varied.

### Coherence of DG ECHO Actions to Humanitarian Principles and Thematic Policies

DG ECHO monitoring placed a strong emphasis on the criticality of needs-based response and primacy of humanitarian principles and risks of aid-diversion, with a strong advocacy on humanitarian principles and their operationalisation and adherence to do-no-harm principles. Balancing access and upholding humanitarian principles in high-threat environments require agencies to have strong capacity to monitor their response and have open dialogue with all stakeholders. Some of the IPs particularly face this challenge as they use the remote management modality because of their limited direct access to the areas of interventions. The application of the EU redline with regard to operations inside the government-controlled areas may have on occasions challenged DG ECHO in ensuring adequate access capacity which sometimes created the perception that a principled humanitarian response could not be ensured. DG ECHO often leads humanitarian donor coordination and acts as a bridge between a number of IPs and several donors as DG ECHO's has been able to share its knowledge and understanding of ground realities in Syria. On nexus, DG ECHO has attempted to encourage other EU institutions to deal with livelihoods and WASH needs in the North-East Syria to the extent possible.

## **EU added value**

The EU has the advantage of being less closely identified with the political and foreign policy posturing of its member governments and this potentially enables DG ECHO to position itself as an independent humanitarian donor. The EU instruments as a collective have the potential to leverage significant influence which no single Member State could have by working on its own. This was evident in the EU's ability to bring together a diverse range of actors on humanitarian response, stabilisation, peacebuilding, and development in the annual Brussels conference<sup>6</sup>. This could potentially give DG ECHO greater space for dialogue and engagement on humanitarian situation in the country, had the EU red line not constrained DG ECHO in having a permanent presence in Damascus for regular field visits, identification of opportunities, challenges and risks related to humanitarian issues.

## **Effectiveness of DG ECHO Actions**

Achievement of results has been strongly influenced by three major factors, namely: (i) flexibility and adaptability to use different modalities and hubs to launch a rapid response; (ii) DG ECHO's ability to identify a range of partners who collectively can access all areas of the country, working closely with either international/local NGOs, local institutions; and (iii) contribution to strengthening the humanitarian ecosystem. DG ECHO ensured that IPs used a range of modalities to ensure vulnerability-based targeting. DG ECHO has been at the forefront of promoting cash-based interventions which several IPs are adopting in their response. There was a strong focus on protection through protection monitoring, support for victims of GBV and sexual-and-gender-based violence (SGBV), psychosocial support and related interventions. On the health response, DG ECHO's diverse range of partners collectively have access to all areas of the country where they have provided basic, primary and secondary healthcare in trauma care, GBV treatment, sexual and reproductive health, psychosocial support/mental health care, treatment of chronic and acute diseases, and treatment of malnutrition. The WASH response included short-term response (water trucking) and rehabilitation of community-managed systems. Non-formal education, remedial classes and school safety targeting children has constituted DG ECHO's response on education in emergencies.

DG ECHO has been at the forefront of advocacy and coordination at different levels to make the humanitarian response more effective and to ensure standards and quality in response delivery. However, there appears to be poor coordination among some agencies at the field level in selection of cooperating partners for frontline delivery. Monitoring data and results reporting varied depending on the extent of access by the IPs, capacity of their downstream partners or quality of third-party monitoring (TPM) and the IPs' own capacity.

## **Efficiency of DG ECHO Operations**

DG ECHO deployed several innovative tools and adapted its structure within the WoS framework to have access to all hotspots inside Syria from different entry points to provide a timely response. These tools and DG ECHO's investment in preparedness (pre-positioning of supplies, for example) have brought about significant gains across a range of inputs, including material costs, transport, storage, and salaries. Though the flexible structure enhanced its access ability and some of the tools and systems deployed were appropriate, protracted grants approval and procurement procedures sometimes affected the timely delivery of response. There is no explicit cost-effectiveness framework by means of which projects are appraised, monitored and assessed. However, evidence shows that DG ECHO staff have a good analysis and understanding of what constitutes efficient and cost-effective response and have used several sophisticated principles and parameters to ensure cost-effectiveness in its actions.

## **Sustainability of DG ECHO Actions**

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<sup>6</sup> Since 2016, DG ECHO co-organises, together with the European External Action Service (EEAS) and DG NEAR, the Brussels conference which brings together donors, IPs, UN agencies, World Bank and several major private financial institutions to discuss the Syria situation. The donor group has its own meetings twice a year, including a special meeting during the annual Brussels conference.

Sustainability of humanitarian actions is difficult to achieve in a context where life-saving humanitarian needs are continuously increasing, and the state has receded from its primary role of protection and provision of services. DG ECHO project appraisals and monitoring reflect good attempts to explore the limited opportunities that exist.

## Conclusions

**DG ECHO positioning and relevance:** DG ECHO has positioned itself as the only major humanitarian donor able to operate in all parts of the country through its wide network of IPs, its set-up and its own field staff who are able to access, directly or indirectly, all hotspots to provide need-based response. DG ECHO's unique contribution to strengthening humanitarian footprint across the country and improving coverage of response in hard-to-reach and besieged areas are widely recognised by other donors and humanitarian organisations.

**Coherence:** DG ECHO was able to leverage its humanitarian footprint to strengthen coordination among key humanitarian actors and engage in humanitarian diplomacy with other donors, including EU Member States. DG ECHO's response in Syria was in strong alignment with the humanitarian principles enshrined in the EU Consensus, the HAR and DG ECHO's thematic policies. There were also challenges faced in operationalising humanitarian principles in case of IPs who relied solely on local partners due to lack of direct access.

**EU added-value:** DG ECHO played a lead role in donor coordination on the Syria response, acting as a bridge between IPs and donors as the majority of the donors could not visit government-controlled areas (GCA). DG ECHO is proactively engaging with other EU Institutions to pursue humanitarian-resilience nexus, where feasible. Individual EU Member States rely heavily on the eyes and ears of DG ECHO on the ground.

**Effectiveness:** In line with the HAR and HIP objectives, DG ECHO's multi-sectoral response integrating protection and assistance for meeting basic needs of the conflict-affected populations reached all parts of the country and enabled the strengthening of the capacity of the humanitarian system to deliver a coordinated response. IDPs and host populations affected by the ongoing conflict have come to depend on food, non-food items (NFIs), water and shelter provided by humanitarian agencies, and DG ECHO's assistance has played a significant part in this in the immediate aftermath of displacement. DG ECHO's move to cash-based interventions (CBIs) enables communities to prioritise their own essential needs. The extensive scale and range of health interventions that DG ECHO has supported have enabled primary healthcare providers to continue to function and deliver healthcare, including trauma-care to deal with the war-wounded and mental health issues, as well as treatment of sexual and reproductive health issues, including sexual and gender-based violence.

At the humanitarian system level, DG ECHO's ongoing support for humanitarian coordination, strengthening humanitarian access strategies in a highly volatile environment with frequently shifting control of territories, advocacy on human rights violations, humanitarian principles and engagement of the donor community are acknowledged by all key stakeholders. However, inadequate coordination at the point of delivery of response in some instances may have caused duplication of efforts and undermined effectiveness as several IPs used the same local organisations. The capacity of implementing partners (IP) to adequately monitor and quality-assure these cooperating partners' adherence to humanitarian principles and do-no harm principles remain unclear as the IPs sometimes have limited direct access. TPM is not always able to flag these complex issues.

**Efficiency:** Efficiency in humanitarian response involves several elements, of which the most important are: (a) timeliness, (b) economy (cost per unit of input is minimized), (c)

cost-effectiveness (cost per output is optimized). DG ECHO operations reflect a good understanding of what an efficient and cost-effective response should look like in the Syrian context.

**Sustainability:** In an environment where humanitarian needs continue growing and development interventions remain frozen, sustainability will continue to be a challenge, though in the past two years DG ECHO has made substantial efforts to move toward life-sustaining actions with its limited funds and facilitated other EU institutions to step in, where feasible.

## Recommendations

- R1:** Develop a regular communication and advocacy message for engagement with other EU institutions and Member States at policy level on DG ECHO's humanitarian imperative and humanitarian principles in accordance with the HAR (*linked to finding F5 – application of red lines challenging principled humanitarian action*).
- R2:** DG ECHO needs to explore the feasibility of setting up a continuous international presence in Damascus to be able to enhance its humanitarian access and engage proactively on humanitarian issues in which it is currently constrained in GCAs due to the visa restrictions (*linked to finding F6 - limited presence in Damascus affecting capacity and space for technical dialogue*).
- R3:** As most of the response in the GCAs and North-West Syria are delivered through local cooperating partners of DG ECHO partners, DG ECHO needs to ensure that all implementing partners, while selecting cooperating partners, follow a standard set of criteria which include their understanding of and experience in operationalising humanitarian principles, and this needs to be reinforced with periodic training (by implementing partners) and review (*linked to finding F7 – good understanding and strong monitoring of operationalisation of humanitarian principles, especially where response is highly dependent on local partners*).
- R4:** DG ECHO needs to work with other humanitarian donors and IPs to develop a harmonised set of standards and protocols for the TPM mechanism which will continue to remain a critical tool in monitoring humanitarian action (*linked to finding F18 – inadequate quality of monitoring data and results reporting*).
- R5:** Continue to advocate with all humanitarian agencies and donors for increasing cash response, wherever feasible, instead of in-kind response (*linked to F11 – DG ECHO leading on cash response*).
- R6:** DG ECHO needs to conduct an in-depth audit of its protracted grant processing mechanism for Syria to assess its appropriateness for humanitarian response and explore room for improvement (*linked to finding F19 - protracted grants approval and procurement procedures affecting timely response*).
- R7:** In order to have a shared understanding of efficiency and cost-effectiveness across the organisation, DG ECHO could consider the feasibility of developing a set of operational guidelines for use during grant appraisals, monitoring and reporting for Syria operations. This needs to be based on a construct of efficiency which is context-specific and integrates (a) timeliness, (b) economy (cost per unit of input minimised) and (c) cost-effectiveness (cost per output optimised) (*linked to finding F21 - no explicit cost-effectiveness framework*).