WEBINAR: European response to the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on the delivery of humanitarian aid (08 of April 2020)

SUMMARY & READOUT

Preliminary note: the intervention of Mrs Kathrin Schick, Director of VOICE (video) that could not join the webinar for technical reason, and a link towards the full recorded event are available in Annex. All questions that were raised but could not be answered during the webinar have been gathered in Annex, as well.

Speakers: Michael Köhler (Deputy Director-General, DG ECHO), Tineke Strik (Member of the European Parliament), Reena Ghenali (Operations Director, UN OCHA), Kathrin Schick (Director, VOICE), Edouard Rodier (Director Europe office, Norwegian Refugee Council).

Moderator: Jean-Louis de Brouwer (Director European Affairs, Egmont Institute)

SUMMARY

This webinar co-hosted by the Egmont Institute and the Norwegian Refugee Council gathered humanitarian actors and representatives of EU institutions (DG ECHO and the European Parliament) to exchange views on the EU response. The day of the webinar coincided with the release of the official Communication on the EU Global Response to the COVID-19 outside Europe, which naturally focussed a lot of the attention of both the speakers and the participants.

Amongst the many challenges identified, access constraint, coordination, duty of care, logistics and transportation emerged, together with the need to secure flexible and sufficient funding to allow aid organizations to adapt and scale up their response to emerging needs. OCHA insisted on the need to work closely both with humanitarian and development partners to ensure an efficient and adapted response, and on the necessity to overcome access restraints and ensure duty of care to aid workers.

The Commission (DG ECHO) echoed by the European Parliament, provided clarification on the Communication that is not bringing fresh money but seeks to mobilize all available resources to support the response, and renewed its commitment to ensure maximum flexibility to partners involved in the humanitarian response.

The Communication on the EU Global Response to the COVID-19 was welcomed as it demonstrated a common front from "Team Europe" (political and financial institutions, and member States) to find solutions in the immediate and longer term and make the best of existing resources. It was also widely acknowledged during the discussion that short-term solutions would not be enough to meet the exceptional challenges this crisis was raising.

*The discussion allowed DG ECHO to provide several useful clarifications and eluded to non-humanitarian aspects of the global response that will be an essential part of the solution. Several related questions remained there unanswered, notably on **how to bridge the humanitarian-development NEXUS during the COVID-19 crisis**, and how non-humanitarian donors plan to adapt*

their response in the mid and longer terms. Answers to these will be addressed in a follow-up discussion that will be organized soon.

<u>**Speaker Presentations**</u> (by order of appearance)

1. Edouard Rodier, NRC Europe

Today, 8 out of 10 refugees live in overcrowded settlements, where health infrastructures are at a minimum. In many instances, medical facilities have been destroyed and health systems have largely collapsed.

Humanitarian organisation operating in areas where legitimate movement restrictions are imposed in response to the development of the COVID-19, aid agencies need to be allowed to maintain their operations and aid workers should be granted access to people in need. To do so, the EU could support our plea for authorities to facilitate for aid workers to operate in spite of restrictions. Transportation is also a problem both internationally and domestically. The banning of commercial flights in areas where humanitarian organisations are operating underline the importance that the UN, EU and Member States support the creation of air bridges. Aid workers who are asked to work in the most exposed areas must be granted priority access to medical care and medical evacuation. This is both a moral obligation and a necessity to keep teams mobilised and able to assist people in need.

It is of the upmost importance that people fleeing wars and violence are allowed to seek refuge across borders. An explicit exemption to the EU's decision to close its board must be made for asylum seekers, with the possibility of imposing quarantine measures when necessary.

The solution cannot be to shift the resources required to meet existing critical needs to cover new developing needs. We must cover both with adequate resources. The UN's Global Humanitarian Response Plan sent a timely signal to all donors, although it mainly supports the UN agencies' response. A fair share of the resources mobilized need to be made available to support non UN entities. This crisis also provides an opportunity to implement some of the recommendations from the Grand Bargain, to try to do more and better, with the money we have.

The COVID-19 crisis is also threatening our global capacity to respond to humanitarian needs in the longer term and donors need to adapt their approach to ensure the response today and preserve tomorrow's response capacities.

2. Reena Ghelani, OCHA

In countries already facing humanitarian difficulties the worst has yet to come. Cases of affected people have tripled over the last week, indicating the dangers of the coming weeks. It is also important not to forget that 100 million people in need have already been identified in those countries. Both people already in need and those affected by COVID-19 need to be assisted.

The humanitarian community is facing two broad challenges: coordination and access. The UN is coordinating both at field and global level through pre-existing systems that have been put in place through the Secretary General's reform. They are working very closely with development actors to address both the medical emergency and the consequent socio-economic impact. It is and needs to be a global response. But we must also not forget local communities. Governments need to start working on community level and actively pursue local engagement.

On access, humanitarian actors are facing new obstacles, amongst which are many necessary measures. They need to reconcile the imperative to stay and deliver and unprecedented access restraints, many of which are pre-existing to the COVID-19 crisis. It is of paramount importance that staff in the field are be able to do their job. Amongst pre-existing challenges, one of the most impactful is conflict. This is the moment to pause conflicts and enact true solidarity leaving no one behind.

3. Michael Koehler, European Commission, DG ECHO

Presented the EU Global Response to the COVID-19 as a strong nexus approach. There are three main pathways through which EU institutions will respond to COVID-19 internationally: the immediate humanitarian response; the strengthening of health systems; addressing the economic and social consequences. A very important component of this Team Europe approach is an increased involvement of international finance institutions within the humanitarian world.

WHO at the beginning of February 2020 published its COVID-19 preparedness and response plan putting together an initial pledge of 675 million dollars. This pledge was made in order to cope with short-term humanitarian needs in health and related areas. In response, ECHO made available 30 million EUR in emergency assistance for the plan.

In the current communication, the EU announced the mobilization of 15.6 billion EUR to support the international COVID-19 response drawing from existing external action resources. Specifically, the funding either originates from the EU's reserves or from the reorienting of programmes that are redirected towards COVID-19-related sectors. This reorientation has not taken funds from food security, nutrition, protection or other sectors. This operation of adjusting programmes amounts to about 200 million EUR in new programmes and programmes to be adjusted.

The Commission is also looking into additional possibilities of making new money from fresh sources available. However, less than a year from the end of the current Multiannual Financial Framework, there are almost no more reserves left, with the exception of very residual amounts.

The EU wants to show maximum flexibility to its partners who are looking to reorient existing programmes in response to COVID-19. Maximal flexibility will be ensured to adapt to the difficulties partners are encountering in the implementation of the response.

4. Tineke Strik, Member of the European Parliament

The COVID-19 emergency is a common crisis with which we are all struggling, the time is ticking, and we are working against time. Innovations and urgent actions are needed in particular towards the most vulnerable IDPs and refugees, who often already find themselves in challenging contexts. The European Parliament is hearing that there is a need for immediate reallocation of the funds and greater flexibility. Today's communication from the commission represents a good attempt to solve these immediate needs. However, more needs to be understood on what can be done for the medium and long-term needs.

The MFF negotiations represent a challenging moment to provide a solution to these issues, but it is equally important that the budget be sustainable for the next 7 years. If no solution can be found through the MFF, then Member States should intervene in terms of solidarity to help vulnerable people around the world.

Solutions should involve flexibility, good cooperation and communication with local communities that are working with IDPs and refugees around the world. It is also of great importance to echo the UN's call for a global ceasefire to ensure the delivery of aid to those who find themselves in conflict zones.

The UN and the EU should be active in creating humanitarian corridors, both by reaching out to national governments and local communities.

The EU should start its action of solidarity by addressing the problems in the Greek islands. The Parliament's LIBE Committee has sent two letters to the Commission and the Council asking for the reallocation of vulnerable people and for preventive evacuation as a response to COVID-19. Border closures can affect refugees by denying their rights to asylum, and the EU should give the good example at its own borders. It is then very worrying when the Commission is sending a dangerous signal by saying it will look for ways to suspend the right to asylum in future crises.

IDPs and refugees are often depending on fragile and developing countries which increases their vulnerability. Often, there is no protection and limited infrastructure to assist them. Going forward it is important to improve their resilience by strengthening their protection and access to services. There is a global common responsibility towards IDPs and refugees. However, hosting countries are left alone as wealthy countries ship responsibilities to less developed countries. We must find ways of increasing solidarity and make sure that there is a fair sharing of responsibilities as well as a strengthening of the resilience of these economies.

Live Discussion

1. Funding

The UN Global Appeal was put together rapidly and therefore was a clear top-down process. In the future, OCHA will look at how to better include more partners in this process.

There is concern that the Global Appeal will divert funding from individual crises rather than mobilizing fresh funding. For now, response plans are seeing similar funding figures than last year, and the UN remains in communication with donors to make sure no money is being diverted in the process.

Amongst alternative instruments for funding, the EU is also mobilising the IcSP, which is preparing a number of measures for the occupied Palestinian territories to respond to the crisis. This represents fresh money and is not being taken from already existing humanitarian funds.

2. Materials and supplies

We have a duty of care towards all those working in response to the COVID-19 crisis, as well as all other humanitarian crises. The UN is trying to build its capacity, however it is also important to be realistic with teams on the ground, managing expectations and information in light of the global challenges in acquiring supplies.

Currently there is a shortage of supplies within the EU. Both acquiring new materials and the cost of transportation has risen dramatically in recent weeks, which has made increasing stocks even more difficult as most supplies are not produced in EU but in countries such as China and India. In the immediate future, the Commission is making available funding and expertise to find solutions.

A stock of supplies will be built up through the rescEU mechanism which has recently been created to respond to similar crises. This stock will be made available to third countries, but only in a second moment given the current difficulties within European countries, including in terms of transport of goods.

3. Contracts

In addition to the guidelines sent to implementing partner organisations, the Commission encourages partners to come back to ECHO with concrete and targeted requests that can be discussed in order to come to an understanding in interpreting the contract in specific way.

The Commission is currently looking at its pre-existing partners mostly. An effective response is what counts at the moment, and there is no time to be spared, for this reason it is is best to work within existing mechanisms without changing their frameworks or introducing new ones. Non-partners should consider entering existing consortia which already work as ECHO partners as the process of becoming a new partner will likely take a long time.

4. Public Opinion

The EU and the humanitarian community as a whole need to think of a narrative to leave no one behind, both for this and future crises. Public opinion has already moved against the current allocation to external aid, which does not even originate from fresh money. Therefore, if a new narrative or "counter-narrative" does not emerge it will be difficult to increase funding in the short and long-term future for such crises.

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