European Union and humanitarian aid

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PURPOSE: to present a Commission communication on a European Consensus on Humanitarian Aid.

BACKGROUND: the main objective of humanitarian aid is to save lives and provide immediate relief for people facing severe crisis whether as a result of natural disaster or of conflict. Over the past thirty years there has been increased emphasis on principles, quality and professionalism in the provision of international humanitarian aid. The humanitarian sector, however, faces a number of specific challenges. For example, crises happen with greater frequency and the impact is often severer (possibly a result of climate change). The nature of conflict has changed and there is increased competition for access to energy and natural resources. In addition, extreme poverty, poor governance and failed states aggravate humanitarian relief work. The main victims are civilians and there is an increasing tendency for humanitarian and international law to be ignored or blatantly violated. Humanitarian aid is one of the EU' s main external policies and collectively, the EU is the largest humanitarian donor in the world.

CONTENT: in developing this Communication, the European Commission reviewed lessons learnt in its responses to crises and examined the results of an intensive consultation process with humanitarian relief partners, which took place in 2006.

Values, principles and coherence

As an external action instrument, humanitarian aid is part of the continuum of EU external actions. While it actively contributes to the protection and empowerment of disaster victims, humanitarian aid is not a crisis management tool: the EU has a firm commitment to the fundamental humanitarian principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence. This principled approach is essential to the acceptance and ability of the EU to deliver aid to the victims of crisis in often complex political and security contexts. Regrettably, global experience in recent years demonstrates a persistent lack of respect for International Law, including International Humanitarian law. The European Commission, therefore, underlines the importance of an active approach to preserving the conditions necessary for humanitarian action. Based on the above, the paper states that the EU should:

- Uphold and promote the humanitarian principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence;
- Advocate strongly and consistently respect for international law;
- Ensure policy coherence, complementarities and effectiveness by using its tools and influence to address the root causes of humanitarian crisis and how to prevent them.

The EU and humanitarian aid

In 2006, the EU collectively, was the largest donor of official humanitarian aid, contributing over EUR 2 billion – that is 40% of officially reported overall international humanitarian assistance. In 2006 EU humanitarian aid reached 75 countries and an estimated 100 million people helping to save many lives around the world, notably in the so-called forgotten crises. The effectiveness and impact of humanitarian aid could be enhanced further, however, by strengthening the coordination reflex and the more active sharing of experience. The aim, therefore, of an enhanced EU coordination is:

- To act in a concerted way in order to strengthen the overall humanitarian response.
- To promote and support well-organised aid delivery strategies.
- To share understanding on needs and how best to respond.
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- To identify gaps and ensure strong arrangements are in place before a crisis occurs.

Good donorship

The EU should confirm its commitment to the existing "Good Humanitarian Donorship Principles and Best Practice". It should also continue to support an ambitious international approach that brings donors together and partners to review principles, standards and best practice for humanitarian actions ("Good Humanitarian Partnership".

Translating principles into practice

The paper discusses the role of appropriate and equitable aid based on needs and standards. Since the perception of a shortfall of humanitarian aid funding persists despite a commitment to higher levels of Official Development Aid (ODA), the EU should analyse both the quantity and effectiveness of its funding programme. This should be based on agreed minimum standards of assistance and protection. In addition, humanitarian aid must be transparently allocated on the basis of needs. Currently there is no single framework or agreed approach to needs-assessment. The paper also considers the role of "aid in kind". The decision on where to purchase aid must remain context specific. Other innovative modalities for aid delivery, including non-commodity based approaches (such as cash and vouchers) should also be considered. The EU should:

- Commit adequate provision of humanitarian aid, in line with its commitment to increase ODA.
- Base this on agreed minimum standards of assistance and protection.
- Seek to establish a common framework for assessment of needs and sharing of expert analysis.
- Ensure an overall balanced response with a special focus on "forgotten crises" and neglected needs and to crises facing serious funding shortfalls where need is clearly demonstrated.

Partnership

EU donors work through multiple implementing partners such as local NGO's, the UN and the Red Cross movement, all of whom have essential and complementary roles. The EU recognises and fully supports the central role of the United Nations. Good coordination between partners and with donors particularly in the field, building upon broad participation in and flexible use of the "Cluster Approach" is essential for an effective humanitarian response. To boost the effectiveness of EU partnerships in the humanitarian field, the Commission suggests the EU should:

- Underline its intrinsic support for a plurality of implementing Partners.
- Acknowledge that each has comparative advantages in responding to certain situations or circumstances.
- Support the central coordinating role of the UN in advancing reforms aimed at improving the overall international humanitarian response.

Effectiveness, quality, accountability and the capacity to respond rapidly

Speed and quality are both critical in delivering humanitarian aid. EC experience show that it is possible and necessary to combine rapid response and efficiency in humanitarian aid with strict accountability policy, through partner accreditation systems and financial control measures. EU capabilities should be strengthened by applying a flexible, systematic operational approach in order to ensure a timely EU donor co-ordination and to provide additional resources to available capabilities, assets and expertise. Practical measures are also needed to ensure complementarities with existing emergency rosters and deployment teams. The European Commission, making full use of its permanent field presence, should facilitate a rapid quality EU co-ordinated field level humanitarian response anchored in international relief efforts.

Use of Civil Protection and Military assets and capabilities

Given that it is vital to maintain neutrality when acting in a humanitarian capacity, the paper suggests that any blurring of lines between humanitarian and military tasks should be avoided. Military forces and assets, therefore, should be used as a "last resort" in humanitarian operations in line with international guidelines. As such the EU should:

- Commit itself to supporting international efforts to map and plug gaps in capacities – in particular transport, communications, logistics and surge-arrangements for responding rapidly to disaster.
- Examine ways to strengthen its own rapid response capacity by building on comparative strengths.
- Adhering to and promoting the Military and Civil Defence assets and Oslo guidelines.
- Reaffirming that Military and Civil defence/protection capabilities must be deployed in a way which complements and supports the work of humanitarian organisations, according to need, context for specialist tasks and support.

Disaster Risk Reduction – increasing preparedness

The promotion of disaster risk reduction strategies and preparedness activities are essential. It should be done at local, regional and national level in developing countries. More recently, there has been renewed international mobilisation to develop more effective strategies for disaster risk reduction and mitigation. The EU has to recognise this and shape its aid approach accordingly: through stand-alone support for community-based preparedness activity, through mainstreaming EU humanitarian and development aid and through advocacy. Accordingly, the EU should:

- Promote international efforts within the Hyogo Framework for Action.
- Mainstream disaster risk reduction in humanitarian and development operations.
- Ensure that adequate EU funding is made available for disaster preparedness and risk reduction activities.
- Establish an overall EU policy approach to support action in this area.

Linking relief, rehabilitation and development (LRRD)

The recovery and reconstruction of countries in the aftermath of a disaster is a major challenge, which requires structural and development action beyond immediate emergency aid. Development and humanitarian actors are increasingly present in parallel for longer periods, with the phasing out of humanitarian aid varying according to sector or region. Increasing mutual awareness of the differing modalities, instruments and approaches is critical to aid effectiveness and ensuring a smooth transition. On the basis of a collective EU experiences in dealing with countries in transitional contexts, the Commission paper argues that a case exists for developing a more systemic policy in addressing LRRD situations. In order to reinforce the link to other aid instruments, the EU should:

- Work together on a framework for advancing practical approaches to LRRD, based on experiences gained and lessons learned.
- Identify a number of LRRD pilot countries for trial implementation of case-specific joint EU approaches.
- Improve cooperation between humanitarian and development agencies and other assistance actors, particularly at field level and in complex situations where States may be fragile.

Implementation of Community humanitarian aid

EC humanitarian aid is governed by Council Regulation (EC) No 1257/96, which provides a clear mandate to offer relief and protection to people facing humanitarian crises. At a Community level a number of policy areas link closely to humanitarian aid. These include: crisis management, food security,

development policy, the promotion of human rights and human security and public health. The EU is committed to ensuring that policy coherence and complementarities are translated consistently into coordinated operational implementation for the delivery of aid.

A European consensus on humanitarian aid

Based on the above analysis, the Commission invites the Council of the European Union and the European Parliament to:

- Adopt a joint declaration on the "European Consensus on Humanitarian Aid", based on the principles and approaches to active donorship outlined in this Communication.
- Reaffirm the EU/UN Commitment to working together in a coordinated, coherent and complementary way to ensure that this consensus is translated effectively into practice.

On the basis of a European Consensus, the European Commission stands ready to propose a roadmap of specific implementing measures to be taken forward by the EU.