

**The European Union:
Humanitarian Assistance and Food Aid
in Developing Nations**

**Lucy Meliksetian
Issue-Specific Briefing Paper
Humanitarian Assistance in Complex Emergencies
University of Denver
2011**

Abstract

This paper outlines the conditions under which the European Union (EU) will provide food aid to developing nations and the various tools and mechanisms utilized by the EU to achieve this goal. Many of the EU's programs are innovative. The paper briefly touches upon some negative aspects of the EU's food aid policy and recommendations for strengthening its program.

(Key Words: food aid, developing nations, European Union)

Introduction:

The European Union (EU) is a large and complex network of 27 European nations whose ideals, values, and politics every so often clash with one another. However, when it comes to providing humanitarian assistance, the EU has set forth comprehensive and clear guidelines as to how it will act and provide aid, taking into consideration that not all nations are alike and that people's needs will vary from state to state. According to a draft communication published by the EU, "EU Member States and the European Commission account for a substantial share of overall humanitarian aid, some 45-50 percent of the total over the past three years. In 2009 the EU provided \$4.25 billion (€3.12 billion) of the total \$9.45 billion (€6.93 billion) of official humanitarian aid."¹

Although the EU accounts for approximately half the aid provided by the international community, this paper will focus on food insecurity in developing nations and what positive and, sometimes negative, impacts this can create. First, I will begin by outlining the conditions and constraints under which the EU can provide food aid to nations. Second, I will layout the various tools and mechanisms ECHO utilizes to provide such aid. Lastly, I will summarize a few negative aspects of the EU's humanitarian assistance policies and its recommendations followed by concluding statements.

Policies on Food Aid Intervention:

When supplying food aid to developing nations, the EU works off a policy framework known as *The European Consensus on Humanitarian Aid*. The main EU branch that supplies,

¹ European Union, European Commission—Humanitarian Aid & Civil Protection, Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council: The Mid-term Review of the European Consensus on Humanitarian Aid Action Plan—Implementing Effective, Principled EU Humanitarian Action (Brussels: 12 Aug. 2010) 2. <http://ec.europa.eu/echo/policies/consensus_en.htm>

implements and monitors such humanitarian assistance is the *European Commission—Humanitarian Aid & Civil Protection*, also known as ECHO. According to ECHO, “In 2010, over 1 billion people [were] considered to be food insecure. Of these, approximately 100 million [were] living in crisis contexts, and face extreme and acute food-insecurity and malnutrition that poses an immediate threat to life.”²

Because of such conditions, the EU set up specific rules and guidelines by which it will contribute food aid. Based on several documents released by the EU, it states that it will provide humanitarian assistance in the form of food aid:³

- When due to inadequate food consumption, emergency rates of mortality or acute malnutrition have been reached or exceeded, or are anticipated, on the basis of firm forecasts;
- When compromised livelihoods or extreme coping strategies (including sale of productive assets, stress migration, resorting to unsafe or insecure survival practices) pose, or are firmly anticipated to pose, a severe threat to life, or a risk of extreme suffering, whether arising from, or leading to, inadequate food consumption and;
- In order to provide assistance and relief to people affected by longer-lasting crisis such as civil wars.⁴

Having said this, the EU knows its limitations and the extent to which it can provide an adequate number of resources. Therefore, its main priority is to provide short-term relief, based

² European Union, European Commission—Humanitarian Aid & Civil Protection, “Food Assistance.” Policies and Evaluation, Food Assistance, 12 May 2010. <http://ec.europa.eu/echo/policies/food_assistance_en.htm>

³ European Union, European Commission—Humanitarian & Civil Protection, Commission Staff Working Document, Accompanying Document to the Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament, Humanitarian Food Assistance (Brussels: 31 Mar. 2010) 6. <http://ec.europa.eu/echo/policies/food_assistance_en.htm>

⁴ European Union, European Commission—Humanitarian & Civil Protection, Humanitarian Aid: Frequently Asked Questions (Brussels: 13 Jun. 2007) 2.

< http://ec.europa.eu/echo/policies/consensus_en.htm >

on a thorough examination of the situation at hand. Only rarely and under certain criteria will it address the problem of chronic food insecurity, “where insufficient food production or an inability to purchase enough nutritious food leads to sustained and persistent inadequacies in the quantity or quality of food consumed.”⁵

The criteria under which ECHO will address such a situation are as follows:⁶

- When non-intervention poses immediate or imminent humanitarian risk of significant scale and severity;
- Where other more appropriate actors are either unable or unwilling to act, and cannot be persuaded to act;
- Where, in spite of its comparative disadvantages, a positive impact can be expected within the time limitations of its intervention.

However, in instances where the EU and ECHO must act to alleviate chronic food insecurity, a detailed needs assessment of the situation, continual dialogue and coordination with agencies on the ground and a clear exit strategy most definitely will be arranged and executed.

While these guidelines may seem stringent and inflexible, this reflects one of the best practices the EU has to offer. Unlike some organizations or nations offering aid, the EU knows its boundaries. It plainly states that it does not have enough staff to carry out its policies for the long-term; time-limited interventions are sought. It does not wish to create a condition of “aid-dependency” where countries are unwilling or unable to sustain themselves because of their reliance and acclimatization to receiving food aid.

⁵ European Union, European Commission—Humanitarian & Civil Protection, Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament: Humanitarian Food Assistance (Brussels: 31 Mar. 2010) 3. <http://ec.europa.eu/echo/policies/food_assistance_en.htm>

⁶ European Union, European Commission—Humanitarian & Civil Protection, Commission Staff Working Document, Accompanying Document to the Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament, Humanitarian Food Assistance (Brussels: 31 Mar. 2010) 4. <http://ec.europa.eu/echo/policies/food_assistance_en.htm>

It is my belief that the EU has made a sound yet difficult decision. If other developed nations ever want to see developing nations fend for themselves, they must construct or adopt similar policies which aid nations in the short-run but allow them the freedom to develop and grow independently, on their own terms, in the long-run.

Tools and Mechanisms Utilized by the European Union:

It is important to note that when providing humanitarian assistance, ECHO “does not implement humanitarian projects itself but funds actions that are implemented through partner relief organizations [which consist of] around 200 European non-governmental relief organizations (NGOs), specialized UN agencies (like UNICEF, WFP, OCHA) and members of the Red Cross/Crescent movement.”⁷ This mainly has to do with the EU’s strict mandate of accountability and transparency. From the outset, it makes clear that with the current rules and regulations in place, unless specific arrangements are made beforehand, the EU “does not permit direct financial engagement with state actors or national civil society organizations”⁸ and has a rule of “zero tolerance for corrupt activities”.⁹

From a best practices standpoint, this is another exemplary regulation put into place. By making sure that its humanitarian aid is channeled and distributed through NGOs and international agencies, ECHO can have greater control and access to financial statements and data, guaranteeing that its resources are well-spent and that all its supplies can be accounted for. By contrast, if they were to channel their humanitarian aid through state agencies, access to

⁷ European Union, European Commission—Humanitarian & Civil Protection, Humanitarian Aid: Frequently Asked Questions (Brussels: 13 Jun. 2007) 2.

< http://ec.europa.eu/echo/policies/consensus_en.htm >

⁸ European Union, European Commission—Humanitarian & Civil Protection, Commission Staff Working Document, Accompanying Document to the Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament, Humanitarian Food Assistance (Brussels: 31 Mar. 2010) 9.

< http://ec.europa.eu/echo/policies/food_assistance_en.htm >

⁹ European Union, European Commission—Humanitarian & Civil Protection, Humanitarian Aid: Frequently Asked Questions (Brussels: 13 Jun. 2007) 5.

< http://ec.europa.eu/echo/policies/consensus_en.htm >

information (accounting and other kinds) might be limited, manipulated, or restricted all together. What's more, there is always a possibility of humanitarian aid (whether funds or supplies) being misused by state actors. Provisions sometimes are sold, with the money being pocketed by state officials.

Another tool ECHO utilizes when distributing food aid, and another best practice, is prioritizing its assistance based on “detailed needs assessments and causal analyses that are as accurate and up to date as possible.”¹⁰ Of course, such in-depth assessments and analyses can be difficult and nigh impossible at times, which ECHO takes into account. However, it does state that in situations such as these, it can make a decision “on the basis of less exhaustive information, and based on the Commission’s own informed judgment and knowledge of the context,”¹¹ providing it with the flexibility it needs in more complex circumstances.

ECHO’s needs assessments are based on the following, clear-cut criteria:¹²

- a. The situational context, including socio-political and operational dimensions that both affect the level of need and determine the feasibility of response;
- b. Routine information on food security derived from systematic monitoring and early-warning systems, set against established baselines;
- c. *Ad hoc* perspectives on the immediate emergency situation based on specific humanitarian food and nutritional data collected through emergency needs assessments and, by way of follow-up, through project monitoring and evaluation.

¹⁰ European Union, European Commission—Humanitarian & Civil Protection, Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament: Humanitarian Food Assistance (Brussels: 31 Mar. 2010) 5. <http://ec.europa.eu/echo/policies/food_assistance_en.htm>

¹¹ European Union, European Commission—Humanitarian & Civil Protection, Commission Staff Working Document, Accompanying Document to the Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament, Humanitarian Food Assistance (Brussels: 31 Mar. 2010) 6. <http://ec.europa.eu/echo/policies/food_assistance_en.htm>

¹² *Ibid*, p. 5.

With strict criteria such as these, one can be relatively sure that the food aid distributed will be received by those who need it most.

Currently, ECHO provides food aid to a concentrated number of regions including: the Horn of Africa (Ethiopia, Somalia, Kenya, Uganda), Sudan and Chad, the Great Lakes Region and Central Africa (Democratic Republic of Congo, Tanzania, Burundi, South Africa, West Africa and Sahel), Asia (including Afghanistan, Nepal, Sri Lanka), the Palestinian Territory, and Colombia.¹³ One of the vital things ECHO has done when assessing the needs of these states is not making blanket assumptions about the people and their requirements. It recognizes that not all situations are alike, that not all people's needs are the same, and that in order for humanitarian aid – especially food aid – to be effective, an agency needs to consider the varying socio-economic and socio-political circumstances of the situation.

In my opinion, this constitutes one of the best practices that ECHO has implemented. The European Commission (EC) stated it best when it wrote, “where needs are uniform and spread across the majority of a population group, assistance can be delivered most effectively and most efficiently, on a blanket basis (i.e. to everyone, or to all individuals fulfilling an easily-defined criteria, such as age). However, more often than not, crises affect different people in different ways, resulting in variations, within a population group, in the nature and depth of need. In these circumstances, careful targeting of assistance is critical to ensure that resources are used with maximum effectiveness and efficiency.”¹⁴

Besides this, the EC has devised a number of simple yet creative ways of contributing to food aid. One such example of “thinking outside the box” is by way of purchasing food either

¹³ European Union, European Commission—Humanitarian Aid & Civil Protection, “Food—Lifesaving Assistance.” Aid in Action, Food Assistance, 30 Mar. 2010. <http://ec.europa.eu/echo/aid/food_en.htm>

¹⁴ European Union, European Commission—Humanitarian & Civil Protection, Commission Staff Working Document, Accompanying Document to the Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament, Humanitarian Food Assistance (Brussels: 31 Mar. 2010) 17. <http://ec.europa.eu/echo/policies/food_assistance_en.htm>

locally or regionally, when circumstances permit naturally. As stated by the Commission, “when food aid is deemed to be the most appropriate tool, local purchase (i.e. purchase in the country of operation) or, secondarily, regional food purchases (i.e. procuring from neighboring countries) are favored, so as to maximize acceptability of food products, protect or support local markets, and reduce transportation costs and delivery timeframes.”¹⁵

Another example of EC inventiveness in humanitarian aid is seen in its support of sustainable livelihoods in the agricultural sector. As implied previously, one of the main foundational precepts the EC employs when deciding on humanitarian relief/aid is whether people’s livelihoods are compromised and whether with the help of the EC, these livelihoods can be sustained. As expressed by the Commission, “food assistance should aim to protect and reinforce livelihoods, since these are the primary means by which households secure their food consumption the reinforcement or protection of agricultural and non-agricultural livelihoods (e.g. providing veterinary services for vulnerable livestock...or improving agricultural crop storage) is a legitimate and appropriate response...to boost food access or food availability.”¹⁶

Lastly, and most ingenious of all, is the EC’s way of indirectly providing food aid. For the most part, when people think of food aid, they think: bags of rice, kilos of flour, boxes of oil, cases upon cases of canned food. However, in actuality, food aid is much more than that, as the EU’s actions can attest. The Commission makes a point of stating that “adequate food consumption may not *in itself* ensure adequate nutrition. Poor health may inhibit the digestion and utilization of nutrients...therefore, complementary interventions, including those that ensure

¹⁵ European Union, European Commission—Humanitarian & Civil Protection, Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament: Humanitarian Food Assistance (Brussels: 31 Mar. 2010) 6. <http://ec.europa.eu/echo/policies/food_assistance_en.htm>

¹⁶ European Union, European Commission—Humanitarian & Civil Protection, Commission Staff Working Document, Accompanying Document to the Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament, Humanitarian Food Assistance (Brussels: 31 Mar. 2010) 12. <http://ec.europa.eu/echo/policies/food_assistance_en.htm>

safe food preparation...or access to potable water, hygiene and health services, may also be required, alongside direct food assistance....”¹⁷

It is my belief that because the EU has creatively employed a combination of these best practices, it exemplifies the best of what humanitarian aid – especially food aid – can achieve.

EU Policies and Improvements that Can Be Made:

The EU recognizes that, although it has accomplished a great many things, it still has a number of improvements it needs to make. According to a mid-term review of the *European Consensus on Humanitarian Aid*, in order to further improve and enhance the EU’s policies on humanitarian aid, certain changes need to be implemented such as:¹⁸

- **Division of labor:** due to different capacities and traditions of EU Member States and EU’s limited human resources, there needs to be a more explicit sharing of leadership opportunities and task facilitation;
- **Prioritization:** there needs to be further development of joint EU action in a few key areas beyond the food sector;
- **Proactive strategic exchange, dialogue and lesson-learning:** this is needed among EU donors and partners to ensure good donorship links, tied to operational practice.

I am of the opinion that should the EU actually implement these suggestions, creating a stronger network amongst its member states, dividing its responsibilities more evenly across the board and crafting a solid foundation for communication and exchange of ideas, the EU would become the premier region *cum* organization in providing humanitarian assistance to developing nations.

¹⁷ European Union, European Commission—Humanitarian & Civil Protection, Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament: Humanitarian Food Assistance (Brussels: 31 Mar. 2010) 4. <http://ec.europa.eu/echo/policies/food_assistance_en.htm>

¹⁸ European Union, European Commission—Humanitarian Aid & Civil Protection, Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council: The Mid-term Review of the European Consensus on Humanitarian Aid Action Plan—Implementing Effective, Principled EU Humanitarian Action (Brussels: 12 Aug. 2010) 8. <http://ec.europa.eu/echo/policies/consensus_en.htm>

Conclusions:

The European Union is a vast and complex set of networks that ties together the fates of 27 European states. It is an intricate web of nations, each with its own goals, interests and ways of carrying out certain policies. Yet, these member states have joined together to put certain differences aside, to create a comprehensive humanitarian aid framework which has contributed to approximately half the humanitarian aid in the world, while saving millions of lives. The EU has set forth specific guidelines to carry out its mission and has devised inventive ways to address food insecurity that go beyond the traditional method of merely giving food away, without taking into consideration the felt needs of the populations being served.

Granted, the EU has certain aspects of its humanitarian mission within the food sector that need improvement. However, awareness is the first step to finding a solution to the problems at hand and since the EU is aware of its soft spots, it will be working on making the necessary adjustments needed for more effective humanitarian responses. It cannot afford to fail in this endeavor, for as the Commission makes clear, “increasing levels of...food insecurity equate to an increasing number of people vulnerable to future crisis. If unchecked, this will multiply the demands on limited humanitarian resources.”¹⁹

If such demands are made and the requisite agencies cannot appropriately respond effectively and efficiently, the world can then expect to see ominous increases: in the number of malnourished people, the number of people starving, the number of people dying, and in a global community unable to help because it lacks the capacity to do so. Let us hope that the world does not denigrate into such chaos and recklessness.

¹⁹ European Union, European Commission—Humanitarian & Civil Protection, Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament: Humanitarian Food Assistance (Brussels: 31 Mar. 2010) 10. < http://ec.europa.eu/echo/policies/food_assistance_en.htm>

Bibliography:

European Union, European Commission—Humanitarian & Civil Protection, Humanitarian Aid: Frequently Asked Questions (Brussels: 13 Jun. 2007).
<http://ec.europa.eu/echo/policies/consensus_en.htm>

European Union, European Commission—Humanitarian Aid & Civil Protection, “Food—Lifesaving Assistance.” Aid in Action, Food Assistance, 30 Mar. 2010.
<http://ec.europa.eu/echo/aid/food_en.htm>

European Union, European Commission—Humanitarian & Civil Protection, Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament: Humanitarian Food Assistance (Brussels: 31 Mar. 2010). <http://ec.europa.eu/echo/policies/food_assistance_en.htm>

European Union, European Commission—Humanitarian & Civil Protection, Commission Staff Working Document, Accompanying Document to the Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament, Humanitarian Food Assistance (Brussels: 31 Mar. 2010).
<http://ec.europa.eu/echo/policies/food_assistance_en.htm>

European Union, European Commission—Humanitarian Aid & Civil Protection, “Food Assistance.” Policies and Evaluation, Food Assistance, 12 May 2010.
<http://ec.europa.eu/echo/policies/food_assistance_en.htm>

European Union, European Commission—Humanitarian Aid & Civil Protection, Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council: The Mid-term Review of the European Consensus on Humanitarian Aid Action Plan—Implementing Effective, Principled EU Humanitarian Action (Brussels: 12 Aug. 2010).
<http://ec.europa.eu/echo/policies/consensus_en.htm>