

Evaluation of the European Union's humanitarian interventions in disaster preparedness

Executive Summary

This evaluation has been commissioned by the Evaluation Sector of the Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (DG ECHO). It aims to evaluate the European Union's (EU) humanitarian interventions in disaster preparedness.

1.1 Objectives, scope and methods

The main objectives of the evaluation are to provide: i) an independent, retrospective assessment of the performance and results of the EU's contributions to Disaster Preparedness (DP) within its humanitarian action from 2015-2020; and ii) strategic recommendations to support DG ECHO future activities in this field.

Geographic scope: The evaluation was undertaken at global level and included country-level data collection covering four countries in four different regions.

Temporal scope: The evaluation focused on the period 2015-2020 but also took into account major changes that occurred in DG ECHO support to DP in 2021. Given the implementation timeline, desk and field phases of the evaluation conducted in 2022 provided a valuable opportunity to include 2021 efforts and progress.

Thematic & financial scope: For defining the thematic scope of the evaluation, the team has used the Guidance Note on Disaster Preparedness published in 2021, as it is the most comprehensive and advanced articulation of the 'culture of preparedness' that exists in DG ECHO and was developed over the two years preceding its publication (i.e. from 2019 to 2021). In line with the 2021 Guidance Note and United Nations International Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR) terminology, the evaluation understands Disaster Preparedness as: i) an important component of Disaster Risk Management, ii) a complement to the longer-term risk management strands, namely prevention and recovery, iii) a theme narrower than and within the scope of Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR); iv) contributing to but not synonymous with resilience, and v) one that applies to the four DG ECHO-recognised types of events: natural hazards, conflict, health outbreaks and technological accidents. This covers in particular two ways of contribution:

Targeted preparedness activities: These include Early Warning Systems (EWS), contingency planning, stockpiling (also known as pre-positioning), shock readiness systems and capacity strengthening. DG ECHO mainly funds these and other specific preparedness activities under the Disaster Preparedness Budget Line (DPBL).

Mainstreaming of preparedness: DG ECHO also expects preparedness to be systematically mainstreamed across the portfolio in 'regular humanitarian budget' which covers DG ECHO-funded humanitarian response projects. While there is no exact definition of mainstreamed preparedness, the DG ECHO DP guidance suggests that it starts with risk proofing of project design. DG ECHO expects risk-proofing to make humanitarian assistance more effective and to ensure that operations do not create new or exacerbate existing risk (i.e., do-no-harm).

The evaluation used a *mixed-methods approach*, combining quantitative and qualitative data leading to a summative and formative assessment with actionable recommendations for DG ECHO. In particular, a set of 48 projects from 45 countries and multiple regions was selected from the portfolio of all DG ECHO-funded projects (3,567) and assessed in-depth. (Remote) country-level data collection was conducted on DP activities in Dominican Republic, Palestine, Philippines and Uganda. Further tools and methods used include i) a document review, including a systematic literature review; ii) a systematic portfolio analysis; iii) quantitative analyses of OECD DAC¹ and HOPE² data; iv) a global eSurvey; v) a mini telephone survey among community members benefitting from DG ECHO preparedness actions; and vi) key informant interviews.

¹ Development finance data, reported by the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

² DG ECHO database

1.2 Findings

Relevance

Disaster preparedness as promoted by DG ECHO is relevant to strengthen humanitarian action both at strategy/policy level and for individual projects.



DG ECHO's Disaster Preparedness (DP) actions have been appropriate to needs and risk levels, and approaches have been relevant. At the global level, DG ECHO has invested the targeted preparedness budget line in countries experiencing relatively high risk, but the geographic distribution of DG ECHO DP funding has not fully reflected risk levels.

At country level, good quality risk/needs assessments were systematically undertaken, updated and applied to inform the design of DG ECHO preparedness support. There is growing recognition that such assessments (and the projects built on them) are more relevant when conducted in a participatory manner. Nonetheless, gaps were identified. Prominent areas deserving greater attention are climate change and conflict sensitivity.

DG ECHO preparedness objectives and mechanisms responded well to beneficiary needs and evolved during the period under review, which demonstrates the ability of the organisation to learn. Crisis Modifiers have been increasingly integrated into the design of DG ECHO projects and were frequently activated. Often using Crisis Modifiers, DG ECHO projects flexibly reacted to COVID-19.

The degree of alignment between DG ECHO preparedness actions and national government policies, priorities and programmes has been variable. Explicit consultation of authorities during design and implementation of DG ECHO preparedness actions was varied, and depended largely on relationships nurtured over time. While DG ECHO does not fund governments directly and is not strictly required to align with government priorities, DG ECHO efforts have increasingly targeted national government systems, and preparedness capacity gaps. National policy frameworks seldom form a key feature of the DP programmes and DG ECHO has not been a strong or regular voice for DP advocacy with government partners.

Coherence

DP programming has decently aligned with evolving DG ECHO policies and approaches from the 2013 DRR Thematic Policy to development of the 2021 DP Guidance, but institutional set-ups are unlikely to take DP any further. Alignment between DG ECHO and EU and other development actors is growing – using DP or DRR as an entry point.



DG ECHO has aligned its DP efforts with key international frameworks (particularly the Sendai Framework and Paris Agreement). DG ECHO support to DP has also been consistent with major EU policies, in particular in terms of their increased emphasis on localisation, resilience, early action, risk knowledge, nexus approach and conflict preparedness. DG ECHO DP portfolio has been largely sensitive to gender and broadly in line with EU policy commitments in this area, but the intersectionality perspective to deal with multiple discriminated-against identities has been limited.

DG ECHO's evolving strategic approach to DP is increasingly underpinned by commitments to address multiple hazards and mainstream DP in all relevant actions, although conflict-related interventions and conflict sensitivity are not yet uniformly present and technological risks barely feature in the portfolio. DP has been integrated in recent DG ECHO sector policy guidance documents, but the actual integration of DP in implemented sector activities remains variable.

DG ECHO efforts have been internally consistent and compatible with actions of other EU entities, however, coordination and joint planning are still limited. Partly due to staffing constraints, the coordination of DP inside DG ECHO is not sufficient to fully attain the desired outcomes. Anchored in practice, understanding of preparedness did not regularly trickle up to promote greater synergies centrally.

Taking into account large differences between them, collaboration between DGs was found to be noteworthy. Coordination at central level between DG ECHO and the Directorate-General for International Partnerships (DG INTPA) was moderate, but inter-DG alignment at multiple levels has been growing and DP (or DRR) has often been an entry point for discussions between the two. At the field level, while still not institutionalised, collaboration was characterised by infrequent joint missions, assessments and at times handovers between DG ECHO and DG INTPA. Despite increasing collaboration, evidence did not support shared goals or collective outcomes among DG ECHO and other EU entities.

EU added value

DG ECHO adds key technical value in targeted preparedness and risk proofing and is often the only or main DP donor in many countries.



DG ECHO has added value to preparedness efforts of other European actors. It has been recognised for its funding and global operational capacity, which, in some instances, have been leveraged to influence the degree to which preparedness is considered at national level. DG ECHO's added value also stems from its technical expertise on disaster preparedness, gained through its broad portfolio and specialisation, due largely to the innovative and long-running DIPECHO³ programme. This long-term investment and focus have also generated reciprocity with other donors and opportunities for collaboration.

An area in which added value was not uniformly perceived is partnerships and coordination capacity. On a global level, DG ECHO has been strategic, nurturing partnerships with actors that went beyond the conventional humanitarian arena. At the regional level, DG ECHO has also developed partnerships with a strategic purpose. At national level, however, results were mixed. Despite their importance to DP issues, coordination with climate change and environmental actors was not strong across DG ECHO's portfolio. Overall, there is an appetite for more coordination and partnership between implementing partners and between DP donors, with leadership by DG ECHO.

Effectiveness

Community, government and implementing partners felt systematically more prepared following DP efforts funded by DG ECHO, especially through targeted DP support. A systems approach – acceptance that community-level DP is most effective when supported by national governments – is taking hold. Despite strong examples of effective community and government DP, results at government level are mixed. Imprecision in the preparedness terminology used obscures some results and hinders learning.



Support for DP has been effective at the community level, and DG ECHO implementing partners have generated greater awareness of disaster preparedness issues among their target communities. They have been successful at developing or reinforcing preparedness capacity of communities in all regions and in both urban and rural contexts. Targeted DP projects have done this more effectively than regular humanitarian projects. Effective community-level examples such as functioning EWS, contingency planning, logistics and stockpiling exist in all regions. Community members served by these projects feel more prepared than prior to these interventions. Critical success factors in DG ECHO's portfolio include strong community engagement from the design phase and an established partner presence that generates trust and enables timely start-up.

There is mixed evidence on the integration of DP in national sector policies and frameworks. DG ECHO has supported the strengthening of national preparedness through organisational mandates, policies and frameworks. Increased DP awareness among governments has been a moderate focus overall, but unevenly effective in the DG ECHO portfolio.

DG ECHO contributed to increased government DP awareness and implementing partners regularly organised awareness raising sessions. While DG ECHO support to build government preparedness capacity was excellent in some countries, it was entirely absent in others. Use of specific national DP instruments was not systematic, although DG ECHO did systematically verify government structure operability in project design, which builds chances for effective preparedness.

While government actors and organisations have been increasingly acquiring knowledge and demonstrating skills in preparedness, they have been regularly prevented from acting on them due to lack of operational budgets. Nonetheless, governments have increasingly been using newly acquired disaster preparedness capacity.

³ Disaster Preparedness ECHO (former DG ECHO programme focusing on preparedness)

Efficiency

DG ECHO has considered efficiency and cost-effectiveness at critical moments of the project cycle. Overall, DG ECHO has done a lot with little. However, the level of funding is disproportionate to global risk levels and there is insufficient documented proof on the savings produced by preparedness to allow ECHO actors to advocate for more DP.



DG ECHO has made solid contributions to DP with small budgets, and avoided overlap with other donors. Overall DG ECHO spending on DP has increased during the evaluation period. However, the size of investment has not been proportionate to rising levels of risks and needs, and 'targeted' spending on DP represented a very small proportion.

DG ECHO achieved good efficiency in the implementation of its support to DP; there are positive examples of DG ECHO and its partners lobbying for more efficient use of funding at country level. However, the monitoring and reporting on such issues varied between DP activities and implementing partners.

The cost-effectiveness of preparedness as a concept (i.e. 'preparedness pays') has been widely accepted within DG ECHO; it has been acknowledged that preparedness makes economic sense by saving time and lives, making DP a cost-effective tool in itself. However, DG ECHO has not yet engaged in measuring the savings produced by preparedness and seems to have no strong detailed position on the cost and time benefits of DP.

Learning and applying lessons learnt across systems have contributed to cost-effectiveness. However, there is no systemwide mechanisms to ensure the cultivation, documentation and global sharing of learning and good practice on DP in DG ECHO.

Sustainability

Sustainability is not a consistent characteristic of DG ECHO's DP outcomes although some context-specific approaches have worked. The lack of contributions to DP by development actors, including national governments and donors, curtails preparedness benefits catalysed by DG ECHO.



Despite an expressed intention to contribute to longer-term resilience, DG ECHO's preparedness portfolio has not yet consistently delivered sustainable results. Successful examples exist of preparedness mechanisms, behaviours and other capacities that were developed during DG ECHO-funded projects and continue to function several years later, but so do many that were not sustained after projects ended.

While most DG ECHO-funded programmes integrated strategies and factors in their design to promote sustainability, many challenges emerged during and after implementation. These include failure by governments to allocate a budget for preparedness after the project ends, high turnover of government staff whose capacities were built in DG ECHO projects, and a lack of follow-on projects to consolidate achievements resulting from preparedness mainstreaming in humanitarian response. Implementing partners have found ways to overcome these and other context-specific difficulties by focusing efforts at the level which promises most return.

Although preparedness and risk proofing have been clearly considered by DG ECHO to be intrinsic to its humanitarian action, DG ECHO has also acknowledged that development actors play a key role in scaling up and complementing these interventions and are thus needed for their long-term sustainability and to ensure their contribution to developing resilience. DG ECHO's intention to ensure sustainability through coordination between preparedness and development actors and 'nexus programming' was evident but, on a global level, only partially realised during the evaluation period.

1.3 Conclusions

Conclusion 1: Tangible contributions at the country and local levels. DG ECHO support to preparedness was very relevant and made tangible contributions at country and local levels. It left beneficiary communities, government agencies, and implementing partners with greater capacity to cope with the next disaster, including applying knowledge gained and lessons learned to engage in more timely and effective humanitarian response operations (i.e., putting contingency plans to practice – often supported with crisis modifiers).

Conclusion 2: Growing application of a systems approach. DG ECHO's approach to preparedness has increasingly engaged and implicated national and local government actors. In fact, from the latter years of the DIPECHO approach to the current DP approach, DG ECHO has made an important visible shift to apply a systems approach to humanitarian programming. The emerging systems approach includes not only communities, but local and national authorities – the duty bearers and often first responders – as well as other development actors, who must be prepared, engaged and able to support communities. While this broader

way of working when contexts allow it has not been evident in every country or project, it has been surfacing as a source of DG ECHO added value.

Conclusion 3: A strengthened corporate culture of risk awareness and projects that are risk-proofed.

Another important achievement was the promotion of a strengthened corporate culture of risk awareness in DG ECHO humanitarian programming. Since 2015, DG ECHO's concern with post-event 'needs assessment' is increasingly being complemented by awareness of the importance of pre-event 'risk assessment'. This has promoted understanding that the risk environment involves inter-related systems that give rise to multi-risk dynamics and, ultimately, cascading effects. DG ECHO uses critically important elements to integrate preparedness and risk awareness into review and design.

Risk-proofing (i.e., do no harm) was a key part of what DG ECHO calls 'preparedness mainstreaming' and was successfully applied to ensure that projects were carefully screened to create no new, and lessen existing, risk. DG ECHO has effectively risk-proofed through the use of the Resilience Marker (in project review) and the Crisis Modifier (in project design). The Crisis Modifier has successfully encouraged many implementing partners to identify the next most probable disaster event and has increasingly sets aside pre-approved funding earmarked to respond to potential events, based largely on pre-defined triggers and thresholds.

Conclusion 4: A more limited, and strategically stronger, preparedness focus. DG ECHO has strategically limited the scope of its support to disaster preparedness for a narrower focus and reportedly greater cost-effectiveness by encouraging development partners to play a role in DRR. This tighter focus of targeted preparedness actions promotes 'no-regrets' activities with benefits for multiple disaster types and direct influence on the effectiveness of regular humanitarian projects.

In addition, although coordination between DG ECHO, development actors and other donors was limited in some contexts, DG ECHO's intention to engage with development actors to explore comparative advantages, respective roles and at times even handovers between actors has increased. DG ECHO clearly expects development actors to invest more, and more consistently, in DRR.

Conclusion 5: A lack of corporate confidence in preparedness. The most important obstacle has been the variable corporate belief in preparedness. DG ECHO staff's attention to save most funding for humanitarian response shows that 'preparedness pays' is not strongly embedded in the corporate culture. There is limited accessible evidence in the DG ECHO portfolio on the return on investment of preparedness. Lack of corporate confidence in preparedness, combined with an inadequate overall budget to address growing humanitarian needs, has resulted in current funding for preparedness being insufficient relative to risk levels. While DP actions are reportedly targeted to countries according to risk levels, DPBL funding relies on the presence of preparedness-experienced Technical Experts and Assistants.

The evaluation team recognises the insufficiency of funding compared to humanitarian need worldwide and DG ECHO's specific mandate. It is precisely because of the recent dynamics observed at global level that increased investment in preparedness (versus an increase in humanitarian response) would provide tangible benefits. There is little discussion inside DG ECHO on how support for preparedness should be increased over time until governments have the capacity to deal with disasters with less or no help from the international community. Funding trends (i.e., that continue to stage response operations for governments) do not convey that DG ECHO is expecting the primary duty bearers to fully assume their humanitarian responsibilities and there is little discussion or visible political buy-in inside DG ECHO for this.

Conclusion 6: Insufficient understanding of the concept of preparedness. A second impediment to greater effectiveness has been a lack of documented evidence of what constitutes effective 'preparedness in response', and lack of practitioner-oriented guidance on how to replicate it. The source of funding (DPBL or regular humanitarian aid) is irrelevant, as long as preparedness is being conducted and integrated across sectors.

This lack of evidence of preparedness-in-response makes it difficult for DG ECHO to monitor, evaluate, or estimate the full volume of funding that supports preparedness. Systems are not yet adapted for these purposes; this effort remains a work in progress and DG ECHO attempts to make an estimate each year since 2015. The calculations are not straightforward, simple, systematic nor easily replicated by an external expert.

Conclusion 7: An institutional environment not fully conducive to stronger investment in DP. Lastly, the DG ECHO institutional environment today is not sufficiently conducive to giving DP the prominence and resources needed for growth. The organisational set up and internal communications do not lend themselves to institution-wide promotion of preparedness. Although the DPBL was established during the period under evaluation, progress such as this has been driven by individual personalities and their convictions more than the structures and systems in place. The unit responsible for preparedness within DG ECHO faces human resource challenges. The number of DG ECHO staff focused squarely on preparedness does not appear to have grown in line with the importance of the theme (i.e., Sendai priorities).

Most informants have not learned about the 2021 Guidance Note, raising questions on the dissemination strategy. Moreover, while the 2021 Guidance Note contains valid and important principles of DP, it does not

provide step by step instructions on what and how to “do preparedness”. Requests for such support were vocalised in the field phase.

1.4 Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Establish a clearer corporate position on how important disaster preparedness is for DG ECHO. To take the current preparedness portfolio to a more systematic and impactful level, it will be critical for DG ECHO to decide if they are ready to be one of the first donors to genuinely own and drive forward the fourth priority of the Sendai Framework: ‘preparedness’. This should be a natural step forward for one of the few donors focused on preparedness – but one that will require numerous DP champions who will articulate stronger positions at leadership levels. The same leaders and champions will need to continue to promote innovation and ensure knowledge management and dissemination on preparedness.

The moment DG ECHO has the political energy to state publicly that ‘preparedness pays’ is the same moment they accept that an increase in preparedness funding will eventually result in less need for humanitarian funding. Advocate for a gradual increase in preparedness funding, estimate the volume of that increase and set it as a goal. Importantly, the position should not make funding for urgent humanitarian response in the near-term less available/accessible.

DG ECHO should launch a global multi-site study to measure how well ‘preparedness pays’ across DG ECHO-funded projects. This will establish a clear quantitative evidence base for the precise cost savings DG ECHO preparedness provides to European citizens.

Recommendation 2: Consider what institutional changes inside DG ECHO are required to promote, roll-out and scale up the new or enhanced ‘preparedness position’. DG ECHO should seize the opportunity provided by the excellent 2021 Guidance Note to officially promote preparedness, increase preparedness funding and systematically produce and apply learning. To do this, DG ECHO should consider if there is room to restructure internal architecture to adequately promote DP. Promotion of preparedness will require high ranking DP champions, a strong fully delegated team in headquarters and strengthened institutional communications and capacity development strategies.

After generations of excellent ‘fire-fighter’ Technical Assistants, increase Technical Assistants’ training on disaster preparedness. It is time to systematise and scale up the good DP actions that are already happening in incubators across the portfolio. Identify “model DP countries” and those needing the most support; highlight and share their good DP practice using exchange visits that include government officials.

Recommendation 3: Set up information or tracking systems to prioritise the geographical focus of preparedness actions and to engage in stronger preparedness accounting. Target all funding for preparedness by level of risk using annual INFORM⁴ updates. Lobby to attract the right implementing partners skilled in preparedness to provide services in those locations. Highest risk countries merit and should get the most attention in preparedness. There will always be valid exceptions; document them in light of national absorption capacity of governments, implementing partners and un-recognised governments. Apply a second layer of targeting by having Technical Assistants track all response operations that are funded twice (for the same hazard set and same location). For them, require a targeted preparedness project that integrates all pertinent sectors.

If DG ECHO needs to report a measure of its global investment in preparedness, identify a simple way to reach that estimate, document and defend it. Once identified, use it consistently over several years to enable trends to become visible. This is also an opportunity to demonstrate that ‘preparedness pays’ and to incentivise donors to do the same. HOPE datasets should eventually introduce corresponding new fields into the DG ECHO reporting forms, rendering these calculations more straightforward.

Recommendation 4: Clarify terminology and move from principles to step-by-step guidance and document “how-to” details to accompany the 2021 Guidance Note. Words matter and concepts count. The 2021 Guidance Note is an excellent starting point that shares critical principles. Clarify the chapters therein that describe ‘preparedness mainstreaming in response’. The evaluation team proposes in this report ways to add clarity to preparedness:

Continue to focus squarely on a concise set of preparedness actions with government and community actors appropriately as well as through all sectors. For all actions, especially those integrated into sectoral responses, it should be clear what they are preparing for, who or what is being prepared, and how. Given the time pressure in response situations, preparedness-in-response should be guided by tried-and-tested design elements and contextualised as needed. For this, identification, documentation and dissemination of learning is critical.

⁴ The INFORM Risk Index is a global, open-source risk assessment for humanitarian crises and disasters. INFORM is a collaboration of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee Reference Group on Risk, Early Warning and Preparedness and the European Commission. Supplementary assessment criteria may be required for specific geographical contexts.

Develop a new component called 'Learning-by-Responding preparedness' to institutionalise on-the-job learning for preparedness outcomes. This seizes the humanitarian response effort to establish system-wide learning that will loop back to inform the next response.

The 2021 Guidance Note is more justifiably named 'principles of preparedness'. It holds important tenets that characterise good preparedness and clarifies which parts DG ECHO wants to promote. Prepare a set of How-To Notes as a companion document. Crowd source with new Technical Assistants, implementing partners and targeted governments to identify which preparedness themes require How-To Guidance. For example, how should DP implementing partners build government capacity without allocating any funds to them? How to enhance a systems approach in preparedness? How to ensure that multi-risk is adequately staged? What are the best practices to promote localisation in preparedness? How to advocate for preparedness at the level of national governments?