

EVALUATION OF THE EUROPEAN UNION EXTERNAL ACTION

THEMATIC EVALUATION

EVALUATION OF DG ECHO'S EXTERNAL COMMUNICATION POLICY AND ACTIONS

November 2024

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Evaluation of DG ECHO's external communication policy and actions, 2019-2023

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ABSTRACT

This report covers the Evaluation of DG ECHO's external communication policy and actions in the period between 2019 and 2023. The aim of the evaluation was to examine DG ECHO's external communication strategies and activities, along with their execution by the communication unit ECHO 01. The evaluation followed a mixed-methods approach, combining extensive desk-based research with consultations with stakeholders and EU citizens. The study was complemented with five thematic case studies that involved more targeted desk research and in-depth interviews, and two expert workshops. The findings confirmed the relevance of DG ECHO's communication activities and channels to raise awareness and understanding of its actions and policies among the EU general public. The evaluation also confirmed that DG ECHO is viewed as an exceptional player and a communication reference for other Commission DGs, implementing partners and international donors. Despite the positive achievements and performance, findings shed light on several internal and external challenges that require some reshaping of the strategic approach. These include the development of a Theory of Change framework and fixed SMART communication objectives over a multi-annual period as well as a more streamlined approach to the integrated communication campaigns and a stronger focus on communicating around breaking news.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Evaluation objectives and scope

The objective of this evaluation has been to examine DG ECHO's external communication strategies from 2019 to 2023, along with their execution by the communication unit ECHO 01. The assessment went further back in time or covered more recent activities beyond the temporal scope to recognise the continuous character of DG ECHO communication. The analysis encompasses various communication facets such as DG ECHO's strategic communication approach, the integrated communication campaigns, field visibility carried out by humanitarian and civil protection partners, media relations, digital and print communication, podcast partnerships, and other external communication initiatives. Other communication and advocacy activities conducted by policy and operational units within DG ECHO and aimed at stakeholders and specialised audiences, fall outside the scope of this assessment, including flagship events such as the European Humanitarian Forum and the Civil Protection Forum. The main focus of the activities assessed is the EU general public, and as a second priority, media and multipliers.

Evaluation design and methods

The evaluation followed a mixed-methods approach, combining extensive desk-based research through a meta-analysis of available data with the following activities:

- Targeted consultations with more than 100 stakeholders, including:
 - Targeted in-depth interviews with DG ECHO staff and core strategic stakeholders;
 - On-line surveys with DG ECHO partners working in civil protection and humanitarian assistance.
- On-line panel surveys with 3024 citizens from six focal Member States (Estonia, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, Portugal and Romania)
- Case studies involving additional consultations with relevant stakeholders.
- On-line sessions with members of the study panel of experts.

The study tasks focused on assessing available data and documentation and gathering the views and experiences of stakeholders and citizens regarding the criteria in the Better Regulation Guidelines, namely relevance, effectiveness, efficiency and coherence.

Key evaluation findings and conclusions

Overall conclusion

Findings from the evaluation confirm an overwhelmingly positive assessment of DG ECHO's external communication performance. DG ECHO is undoubtedly a very strong communicator, recognised as one of the best-in-class both inside and outside the Commission. It is viewed as an exceptional player and a communication reference for other Commission DGs, implementing partners and international donors. Key aspects underpinning this position include:

- a highly experienced and professional team recognised by the communication agencies with which it works and by the media;
- the volume of communication activities designed and implemented with consistent high-quality look and feel;
- an emphasis on story-telling and human-interest stories in line with current communication practice, which resonate with audiences;
- a focus on testing, learning and continuous improvement; and
- the use of channels and tools that are innovative within the Commission context – from podcasts to working with identified influencers on TikTok via contractors.

Whilst DG ECHO's communication is based on cost-effective and efficient practices, the DG is not maximizing the value for money of its communication budget because resources are spread too thinly. The lack of SMART objectives over a multi-annual period for DG ECHO's communication and corresponding mechanisms to understand results and impact on citizens, has limited this understanding to results generated by individual channels and/or campaigns. When it comes to breaking news, DG ECHO's focus is well-placed within the institution. Yet, the institutional mechanisms and processes in place limit DG ECHO's potential to maximize this opportunity. In particular, the model in use across the Commission –and deployed by DG ECHO– with a significant emphasis on longer communication campaigns does not make it well placed to 'take advantage' of the news around emergencies as well as it might – notwithstanding its current efforts on social media.

Key conclusions under relevance

The evaluation findings confirm that DG ECHO has used relevant communication activities and channels to raise awareness and understanding of its actions and policies among the EU general public. The annual strategies have adequately reflected the shifting communication priorities in line with the needs of EU citizens, and these have also shaped the topics of the annual integrated campaigns and podcast partnerships, as well as the other communication activities. DG ECHO has developed strong mechanisms for ensuring that its communication remains relevant to its audiences, with a focus on synergies and innovation.

Whilst current pre-testing approaches in the framework of the integrated campaigns have suggested that audiences in different Member States have similar responses to specific concepts and images, the evidence from the evaluation also suggests that there are risks to pre-testing campaign messages and tools in a small number of countries as different nationalities can respond quite differently to communication messages and stimuli. The extent to which contractors tease out the cultural differences which could support more impactful posts relates to their pre-testing approach. But this approach may not dig deeply enough or be sufficiently bottom-up to facilitate the type of co-creative approach that could result in 'break-through' campaign assets. Beyond the integrated campaign approach, DG ECHO is in a unique position to shape its communications more around breaking news stories. There are examples that confirm the potential to maximise awareness and acceptance of DG ECHO's initiatives through a stronger focus on communication in emergencies.

Relevance of DG ECHO's communications to the EU public. DG ECHO's strategic approach to communication has been tailored over the years to ensure that the communication priorities are aligned to the needs and concerns of EU citizens. These shifting priorities, which have spanned from the impacts of COVID-19 in 2021 and 2022, to Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2023 and 2024, and to conflicts in Sudan, Gaza and other parts of the world and the EU elections in 2024, have also shaped the choice and content of channels and tools.

Relevance of DG ECHO's channels and tools. The integrated campaigns and podcast partnerships designed and implemented during the period under evaluation have been tailored to identified audience segments across countries and regions, age profiles (with a focus on age groups under 55) and attitudinal stance (with a focus on citizens with a positive or neutral attitude towards the EU who are potentially more receptive to the messages). The annual strategies have also prioritised integration and synergies across the different tools and channels.

Mechanisms to guarantee the relevance of DG ECHO communications. The above principles (synergies and innovation) have been materialised through an open approach, which includes the consistent use of pre-testing in preparation for each campaign, the flexibility to adapt campaign strategies and activities in case of difficulties or changes, and more recently in the last years, the design of two-phased campaigns. However, budgetary constraints have limited the pre-testing

research to a small number of countries, creating a risk that campaigns will miss reactions. While our panel surveys looked at organic social media clips rather than campaign material, they do illustrate that different nationalities can respond quite differently to communication messages and stimuli.

Relevance of content on breaking news. DG ECHO is in a unique position to move from the communication campaign approach that has consumed a large budget in the period under evaluation to an approach focused on communicating around breaking news stories. There are resources at DG ECHO's disposal (including the press trips and the specific coverage and media engagement activities during emergencies) that confirm the potential to maximise acceptance and engagement with DG ECHO's initiatives through communication in emergencies.

Key conclusions under effectiveness

DG ECHO is viewed as an exceptional player and a communication reference for other Commission DGs, implementing partners and international donors. Despite the positive achievements and performance, there are several internal and external challenges that require some reshaping of the strategic approach (including a theory of change framework and fixed SMART communication objectives over a multi-annual period) as well as more focus and repetition in a longer timeframe (streamlined themes and messages implemented as part of its campaigns, longer-term media relations with more focus on personal relationships on the ground). Setting channel KPIs at output, result and, where possible, impact level would support the achievement of overarching SMART objectives. In particular, the indicators for integrated campaigns should relate to recall, as the indicator of reach.

In terms of the integrated campaigns and the podcast partnerships, the evidence shows that triggering engagement among the general public can be extremely challenging in the current context (including in terms of budget available, geographical scope, digital tools, multiplicity of messages). Focusing on awareness and understanding, in particular through measuring recall, is a more realistic aim. This should be supported by the development of a monitoring framework focused on measuring results and impact of communication campaigns in the broader context to confirm the contribution of the specific campaigns to DG ECHO's broader communication objectives.

DG ECHO's other communication activities (social media and website, media relations) are effective in supporting the communication priorities. The time taken by RIOs in issuing press releases could usefully be reviewed given the doubts about the utility of press releases to free time for them to put more effort into social media, including more appropriate channels in each region in addition to X, using paid promotions and developing cross-posting practices with partners.

Visibility and external communication requirements and the support provided by DG ECHO are positively perceived by partners both in the humanitarian aid and civil protection fields. Despite the fact confirmed by DG ECHO that exemptions are always granted if there are valid safety and security risks, there were some partners who perceived there could be scope for further flexibility in the requirements to account for safety and security issues in the humanitarian aid context and time constraints in civil protection emergencies. The main challenge for DG ECHO colleagues in the field is to monitor compliance with the visibility and external communication requirements.

Scope to refine the overarching logic of DG ECHO communications. The evaluation pointed to a number of gaps in the underpinning of DG ECHO's communication, including the absence of a Theory of Change to frame its approach and the lack of overarching communication objectives for the period spanning the annual strategies.

Despite strong communication performance, there are challenges of ensuring recognition among the EU general public. Findings from the panel surveys show that only circa a quarter of respondents correctly recognise the EU when they are exposed to DG ECHO organic communication materials on-line. This is a broader challenge faced by institutional communicators in a context of multiple messages and competitors.

Scope for further streamlining the integrated communication campaigns. The annual campaign approach implemented by DG ECHO has been an impressive achievement over the period under evaluation, both in terms of the organisation and professionalism of the campaigns. Despite the effectiveness of the campaigns and the learning process that was built over the years, the multiplicity of countries and audiences targeted by the campaigns confirms that the efforts and resources are spread too thinly, and that the approach to campaigns should aim to be more focused – with longer and more targeted campaigns and key messages repeated over a multi-annual period.

Social media as a key component of DG ECHO's communication approach. Performance metrics confirm the effectiveness of DG ECHO's social media activities when measured against the KPIs set, including both in terms of growing the number of followers and engagements across different channels. Social media has supported the communication activities undertaken by the DG. The approach has functioned well and successfully integrated content from the campaigns and content to support emergency-driven coverage, within regular communication flows.

Limited focus on website communication. The lack of a specific website strategy document and the limited number of KPIs linked to DG ECHO's website (only one output KPI linked to the number of page views) suggests that DG ECHO prioritised social media channels in terms of digital communication. The findings also confirm that the website needs to adhere to the standard Commission template, which has prevented a more dynamic look and feel and a more interactive approach to engaging with visitors.

Scope to further enhance the approach to media relations. DG ECHO has a positive reputation among journalists and a unique advantage in that they offer access to those on the ground affected by emergencies and in-depth information which stands out from other EU institutions' media handling. This selling point needs to be further exploited by limiting the number of press releases (point which was highlighted in the 2024 strategy for the first time) and re-thinking the approach to communicating more via social media and considering how personal relationships can be built between DG ECHO staff on the ground and journalists, e.g. those based in the regions and reporting to EU publications. DG ECHO press trips are well-regarded compared with those of other humanitarian organisations, but they are challenging and demanding to organise, and the results are uncertain.

Monitoring DG ECHO's communication activities. The strategic approach to monitoring has focused on DG ECHO's own channels and contractors' monitoring of their communication campaigns. The KPIs set at DG level have focused on measuring activities and outputs, which relate to how money is spent, but not on supporting understanding of the value of doing the communication, and whether they increased awareness. Adapting this approach implies setting KPIs at result and impact level and establishing monitoring systems to collect the evidence. The one campaign KPI that is included in the communication strategy relates to reach. The strategy could be enhanced by adding a KPI relating to recall (which is the indicator of reach) as well as enhanced understanding.

The approach to visibility and external communication works well and partners value the support and guidance provided by DG ECHO. The evaluation confirms familiarity and compliance with the visibility and external communication requirements. Despite high levels of satisfaction in terms of the support and guidance received from DG ECHO and the RIOs, partners appreciated the need for more flexibility in implementing the requirements in challenging contexts. Monitoring compliance is a time-consuming exercise for the RIOs and ICAs, and perceptions on the effectiveness of partners' external communication in enhancing support from stakeholders, the

public and the media were not particularly high, which suggests the need to consider ways to improve this through a stronger focus on lesson learning, best practices and opportunities for communication.

Key conclusions under efficiency

The evaluation findings suggest that the communication activities designed and implemented by DG ECHO during the period under analysis were aligned with the overall goals of raising awareness, and that the communication unit combined flexibility and professionalism to steer choices in response to internal and external circumstances. Despite the positive assessment, the efficiency of DG ECHO communication activities could be increased by taking a step back and prioritising among the broad menu of activities with the aim of achieving better results with the financial and human resources available. Suggested improvements to the approach include investing more money in research, including pre-testing and baseline and ex-post polling, implementing fewer and longer campaigns with overarching themes and slogans and investing more in social media paid promotion outside the campaigns.

It is challenging to assess the extent to which DG ECHO's own communication channels and activities managed to achieve their results in a cost-effective way. Cost data is hard to disentangle from the overall communication budget, as well as the objectives and priorities. The evidence suggests that the different communication activities were aligned with the overall goals of raising awareness, as stated in the ECHO annual communication strategies. There is no evidence to suggest that the overall approach was not cost-effective.

DG ECHO was sufficiently agile in its approach to support suggested changes to the communication campaigns. Evaluation evidence suggests that DG ECHO combined flexibility and expertise to steer choices on the allocation of campaign budgets and implement changes as required by internal or external circumstances. The approach included tracking channel performance and reallocating budgets to channels achieving the highest campaign reach; integrating paid and owned channels to maximise the dissemination of campaign assets; and using innovative channels which are rarely used in an EU institutional context to better reach specific groups.

The assessment of DG ECHO's communication mix confirms the need to find ways to optimise the limited capacity and human resources of an overstretched team. The evidence from the evaluation suggests that the main challenge is not to identify new or different activities that could be included in future communication, but to streamline the current offer with the aim of managing the workload better and ultimately achieving better results and impact.

Key conclusions under coherence

With regards to the internal coherence of DG ECHO communication activities, the evaluation evidence confirms the existence of an integrated framework for communication aligned under the annual strategies. The complementarity of the communication activities is further underpinned by a cohesive team that sets aside a dedicated time annually to discuss, adjust and re-launch the strategies and follows-up with regular meetings and contacts. However, there is scope to further align the activities by finding mechanisms to encourage enhanced coordination between the team in headquarters and the regions, but also between the RIOs or ICAs themselves and with other relevant stakeholders working on the ground.

External coordination has been more challenging in practice. While the annual integrated campaigns have systematically built in the need for synergies with corporate campaigns, including through targeting similar audiences, alignment of key topics and messages, collaboration with the Commission Representations in the Member States, and use of the Communication Network indicators, in practice there have been little opportunities for collaboration because of the fewer Commission campaigns and the lack of relevance to DG ECHO topics. Collaboration with the SPP, EU Delegations and other Commission DGs has also met with difficulties in the context of media relations, digital communication and visibility activities in the regions.

The annual communication strategies as a mechanism for enhancing internal coherence.

The analysis confirms the existence of an integrated framework for communication corresponding to the timeframe, political mandate and priorities of the current Commission. The changing political context and needs were adequately reflected in the subsequent strategies, and the objectives, priorities, themes, tools and channels were kept at a broad level to allow for flexibility to adapt to the emergency-driven context in which DG ECHO operates.

Internal coherence further reinforced by a focus on learning. Despite the generic formulation of the different components of the annual strategies, the evaluation also shows tailoring in the last two strategies. The 2024 annual strategy document reflects a learning curve with several new elements not identified in the previous strategies. These include a call for fewer press releases, communication in cooperation with other DGs and governments and adapted to the changing nature of social media, the need to adopt a visual storytelling approach, a focus on communication and advocacy towards decision makers, and a focus on exploring an extended multilingual offer of DG ECHO's products.

Despite synergies between the different communication activities, the small team and limited resources call for additional actions to boost the efforts. There is a strong degree of complementarity between the communication activities. This is linked to an annual planning process led by a cohesive team within the DG ECHO communication unit that puts a lot of emphasis on the need for synergies at all levels, including across channels, teams and thematic areas. Despite the positive findings, there are challenges related to the small team and the limited resources to design, implement and monitor the communication activities which would profit from exploring additional opportunities for synergies.

Complementarity with corporate campaigns has been built as part of the DG ECHO integrated campaigns. Campaign ToRs have included requirements linked to targeting, messaging, collaboration with Commission Representations and use of the Commission's indicators approved by the Communication Network, which (where relevant) have been addressed as part of the campaigns. In practice, actual synergies in recent years have been more challenging because of the fewer corporate campaigns and the limited links with DG ECHO's themes.

Coordination with SPP, EU Delegations and other Commission DGs more challenging in the context of media relations, digital communication and visibility activities. The centralised approach to communication within the Commission poses challenges to DG ECHO's approach to media relations and social media communication. Coordination and collaboration with EU Delegations and other Commission DGs is also challenging in the context of digital communication and visibility activities given the different agendas and interests. Despite the difficulties, there are examples of positive collaboration and there is an emphasis in the 2024 communication strategy on the need to strengthen the joint work and the synergies.

Overarching recommendations

Theory of Change approach. Based on the conclusions highlighted above, we recommend that DG ECHO develops a Theory of Change approach. A Theory of Change starts from the desired impact and then considers what would be required to achieve that, scaling back the ambition, if necessary, in the light of the budget available, rather than starting from a budget and deciding how to allocate it. It tests those assumptions and asks fundamental questions about what communication is trying to achieve and in DG ECHO's case how best to make the most of the (sadly) emergency-driven opportunities to raise its profile, and whether the current model is the best model for achieving that. It explores which audiences are most important and why and assesses whether DG ECHO has the knowledge to answer that question based on the existing research. Theory of Change goes hand-in-hand with value for money. The development of these elements, together with the refinement of the intervention logic for communication, would support a clearer and more consistent understanding within the DG and vis-à-vis external stakeholders.

Fixed SMART communication objectives over a 5-year period. We recommend fixing the top-level communication objectives over a 5-year period to provide clear goals against which all ECHO communications could be aligned, allowing for flexibility to address unforeseen issues.

Streamline the approach to the integrated communication campaigns. There are good reasons for the current approach, and these underpin the likely decision for its retention in the future. Yet, looking from the outside in, there are other opportunities. We recommend DG ECHO to consider simplifying campaigning by streamlining the number of campaigns, themes and slogans rolled out over the five years of the Commission. This does not imply that an individual campaign would last five years, although there could be a strategy of layered campaigns building a momentum with citizens. Longer campaigns with fewer slogans and more impactful hashtags could be part of a strategy to consolidate campaign outputs and to reinforce their results and impacts.

Supplement the communication campaign approach with a focus on communicating around breaking news. We recommend DG ECHO to tailor the resources and tools at its disposal to move to an approach focused on communicating around breaking news stories. This includes building a budget to communicate on emergency communication and tailoring the approach to media engagement to better position DG ECHO staff on the ground during emergencies. As evidenced by the findings from the case study on communication in emergencies, the solution lies not in particular communication channels or tools, but in what is being communicated and by whom. In this line, DG ECHO staff in the regions should be given the time and the authority to develop long-term relationships with journalists on the ground so that no time is lost when a story breaks, and they can quickly facilitate interviews with the people most affected. That will help position DG ECHO as central to the story from the outset and encourage journalists to keep returning for updates.

Specific recommendations, categorised by communication activity, are developed in detail in the main report.

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