



CONFERENCE REPORT

EXPERT ROUNDTABLE

“A comprehensive versus a principled approach – opportunities and risks for EU humanitarian assistance”

**Tuesday 15 October 2013
12.00 – 17.00 h**

**in the European Office of
Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung
Av. De l'Yser 11
1040 Brussels, Belgium**

hosted by

CARE
&
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Introduction

The expert roundtable aimed to promote a discussion among European policy-makers and representatives of the humanitarian community on the establishment of an EU 'Comprehensive Approach' (CA). An analysis of the speeches and comments of participants shows that there is general agreement on the need for some level of coordination among EU actors working to address crisis situations. However, there remain some concerns among the humanitarian community regarding the potentially negative consequences that this new approach may have on the ability of humanitarian organizations to safely conduct their operations in the field. Many participants perceive the implementation of an EU Comprehensive Approach as a potential threat to the central principles of humanitarian assistance: independence, impartiality and neutrality. They stressed the need to include humanitarian actors in coordination debates while maintaining humanitarian assistance wholly separate from the EU political and military agenda.

In this context, the present report summarizes the four main topics discussed during the expert roundtable: the rationale behind the establishment of an EU Comprehensive Approach, the independent status of DG ECHO within the European institutional framework, the possible challenges and opportunities of an EU 'Comprehensive Approach,' and the relationship between the principled approach and the human rights based approach and the role the CA could play in enabling them to co-exist.

An EU 'Comprehensive Approach'

On 24 June 2013 the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice-President of the European Commission, Catherine Ashton, issued the Joint Communication *Towards a comprehensive EU approach to the Syrian crisis*. The launch of this document was the latest concrete step made by the EU to implement the notion of an EU 'Comprehensive Approach', i.e. a coherent framework of engagement to tackle political, diplomatic, security and humanitarian constraints.

However, the recent Communication on Syria, coupled with experiences of EU attempts at implementing a CA strategy in the Horn of Africa and the Sahel and experiences of CA implemented by the wider international community in contexts such as Libya and Afghanistan, have demonstrated the variety of understandings and potential for misunderstanding of the notion of a 'Comprehensive Approach'. According to a broader understanding, the CA should be taken as a holistic and integrated approach, which allows the EU to operate as one actor combining policies, tools and activities to achieve specific objectives in challenging contexts. A narrower understanding of the concept presents the CA as a crisis management instrument developed through civil-military cooperation.



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During the expert roundtable, it became evident that the EU shares the broader understanding of the CA. The EU sees it as a holistic approach to bring more coherence to its external actions and to improve its response to crisis situations. It must be stressed that this understanding of the notion of ‘Comprehensive Approach’ is exclusive to the EU. Other institutions, such as NATO, make a different use of this concept.

The humanitarian community expressed its hope that the upcoming EU Communication on the CA resolves the issue of conceptual clarity, defines better the mandates of the parties involved, and addresses some of the uncertainties of the humanitarian community regarding its potential impact on humanitarian operations in the field.

The independent status of DG ECHO

As the European Commission (EC) Directorate General (DG) responsible for humanitarian assistance and civil protection, DG ECHO is one of the key actors in any ‘Comprehensive Approach’ proposed by the EU for crisis situations. However, there is a fear that the CA may jeopardize the ability of DG ECHO to continue conducting its work as a principled actor—despite the fact that the independence of EU humanitarian aid and EU adherence to humanitarian principles are enshrined in the Lisbon Treaty.

On the one hand, there is a need to turn DG ECHO into a more transparent actor within the EU institutional framework, and to ensure that DG ECHO is at the table, providing its perspectives in discussions of direct relevance to contexts in which it operates. On the other hand, it is essential that DG ECHO maintains a clear degree of independence, particularly in fields of operation, to ensure it is not perceived as an actor involved in political decision-making. Moreover, there is a consensus that DG ECHO’s work should maintain a focus on people’s needs in humanitarian crises and implement a principled approach.

DG ECHO therefore proposes to be both ‘in’ and ‘out’ of the EU CA. In practice, this means that DG ECHO, as a fully-fledged DG of the EC, must be included in a coordinated process of agenda setting through needs analysis, assessments and information sharing. However, when the implementation phase begins, it must remain an independent actor, faithful to the principles of humanitarian assistance and thus capable of fulfilling its role, avoiding jeopardising the security of implementing actors and beneficiaries and compromising the effectiveness of DG ECHO actions.

Challenges and opportunities of an EU ‘Comprehensive Approach’

The implementation of a coordinated approach that maintains the independence of DG ECHO is one of the challenges of the CA. However, there are other concerns related to the CA that transcend the work of this DG.



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The humanitarian assistance community fears that through the CA the EU is not merely trying to develop a more integrated and effective approach but that it is, in certain instances, blurring the lines between humanitarian aid and foreign policy, with potentially dangerous and/or counter-productive consequences to the delivery of life-saving assistance. Indeed, where the EU delivers aid through instruments other than through ECHO, in ways that do not adhere to humanitarian principles but have clear policy aims, humanitarian actors fear that they could be perceived as mere foreign policy instruments. In such circumstances, a CA could lead to serious operational challenges for humanitarian actors, posing a threat to the safety of staff and beneficiaries, as well as difficulties for humanitarian actors to access communities in most need.

Therefore, along with the request to define clearer mandates and roles within the framework of the CA, humanitarian organizations ask the EU to be mindful in its external communications to avoid propagating a perception of humanitarian actors as implementers of political objectives of the EU. The 'Comprehensive Approach' concept is not problematic in itself but rather it is its implementation that could potentially pose difficulties. For this reason it is necessary that all those involved in and affected by the implementation of the CA understand each other's roles and mandates and actively participate in its design.

In this context, the EU should intensify the dialogue with the humanitarian community on the 'Comprehensive Approach'. It has already been mentioned that humanitarian organizations are concerned regarding the possible consequences of the CA implementation on humanitarian activities in the field. Thus, one of the challenges of the CA is to promote an improved exchange of information and ideas between EU representatives and the humanitarian community, so that the interests of both sides may be taken into consideration and a more effective approach may be put into practice, ensuring that the concerns and specific needs of humanitarian actors are respected.

The Comprehensive Approach: towards the coexistence of the principled and rights based approaches?

The development of a CA and the coordination among the various EU actors active in a crisis raise questions regarding the relationship, within the CA, between the principled approach (HPA), which typically defines humanitarian actions, and the human rights based approach (HRBA), largely adopted by development actors, working on longer-term solutions.

During the roundtable, experts agreed that there is no opposition between HPA and HRBA, as responding to the needs of the most vulnerable populations can be considered as part of a broader rights-based approach. The difference between the concepts consists in the way the response is provided. Humanitarian actors respond to immediate needs arising from an absence of rights--as protection is a right and a



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responsibility of governments and not of humanitarian actors—and they do not implement their actions in collaboration with local governments, as is the case with development actors. Indeed, the respect of humanitarian principles, particularly independence and neutrality, and their short-term mandate, prevent humanitarian actors from implementing their activities in the same way as the development actors, limiting their ability to take a holistic HRBA through their actions.

Despite the limitations that humanitarian actors have in implementing a wholly HRBA, experts agreed that humanitarian actors can take a rights-based approach through implementation of an advocacy agenda to address rights violations in their countries of operation. Furthermore, experts felt that the CA could create a space to strengthen the coordination between humanitarian and development actors in the long term, especially in an international cooperation system that is moving towards linking relief, rehabilitation and development.

Conclusions

The EU needs to improve its capacity to implement coordinated and integrated responses to crisis situations. The EU ‘Comprehensive Approach’ is an important instrument to achieve this goal. However, roles and mandates must be clearly defined. The actors involved as well as the local and international communities must know who is responsible for the political decisions and who is conducting work to relieve the suffering of the civil population in need. A ‘Comprehensive Approach’ is not necessarily incompatible with a ‘principled approach’ or indeed a ‘human-rights based approach’. In fact, provided that it respects the principles of humanitarian assistance, the ‘Comprehensive Approach’ may improve the capacity of the EU to engage more effectively in international crises and, most importantly, to achieve appropriate, human rights-based solutions to complex conflict situations, reducing the need for life-saving assistance to be delivered. An EU CA must, however, be implemented in a way that does not blur the lines between EU political, military, and humanitarian objectives and activities. Initiatives that promote dialogue between EU representatives and representatives of the humanitarian community are essential to improve mutual understanding and facilitate the implementation of a more effective ‘Comprehensive Approach’.

However, along with a permanent dialogue at HQ level that would allow for a more consistent participation of all EU actors in the development of the CA implementing agenda, humanitarian aid should remain excluded from the CA implementation on the ground. Furthermore, the line between the politicised development cooperation instruments and humanitarian aid should be blurred neither by the EU nor by dual-mandated organizations working in both development and humanitarian assistance. Clarity on the implementation of the CA will allow the EU and its partners to avoid potentially negative consequences of a CA on the security of actors and beneficiaries as well as on access to populations in need and the overall efficacy of humanitarian actions.