



# Evaluation of the ECHO response to the Syrian Crisis 2012-2014

## Executive summary June 2016

This evaluation was commissioned by the Evaluation Sector of the Directorate General Humanitarian Aid and Civil Protection – ECHO (European Commission)

*The opinions expressed in this document represent the authors' point of view which are not necessarily shared by the European Commission or by the authorities of the concerned countries.*

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# Executive Summary

## The evaluation subject and objectives

This evaluation provides an overall independent assessment of the ECHO response to the Syrian crisis in Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, and Turkey for the period 2012-2014. It covers ECHO-funded operations in these five countries and answers a set of 18 evaluation questions defined by the European Commission, which serve as a basis to reaching useful conclusions and recommendations. The evaluation is geared to a wide range of stakeholders, including ECHO Headquarters (HQ) and country level staff, national and regional stakeholders, participating implementing partners, and other humanitarian and development donors and agencies. It has both a retrospective and prospective dimension, aiming at assessing past support, but also at providing recommendations with a view to improving the performance of ECHO operations in the future.

## Methodology

The evaluation used a three-phase approach including inception, data collection and synthesis phases. The analysis was structured around five country case studies, one for Syria, and one for each of the border countries covered. At the end of each phase, the related deliverable was reviewed and approved by the evaluation steering group.

The data collection phase included both desk and field work covering the 18 evaluation questions defined in the evaluation terms of reference. The team conducted visits to each of the countries covered, except in Syria, for which field work was covered through extensive interviews in Amman on the ECHO support provided in Syria and telephone interviews with ECHO partners operating inside Syria both in Damascus and areas controlled by armed opposition groups. Overall the team interviewed 122 stakeholders (face-to-face and over the telephone), including representatives from European Commission (EC) headquarters, ECHO field offices, EU Delegations, Member State representatives, UN Agencies, national and local authorities, international and local NGOs, and beneficiaries. This included also on-site visits. The team reviewed 287 documents, including policy and strategy documents, evaluations and or studies, and a more general literature review. The country level information is gathered in country notes that are annexed to this report.

The team compiled and triangulated data during the synthesis phase, so as to provide consolidated answers to the evaluation questions. Information gaps were completed using additional telephone interviews with ECHO partner offices in the region. The consolidated cross-checked findings served as a basis to formulate the conclusions and recommendations, which are presented in this summary.

## Conclusions

### Overall statement on ECHO's response

ECHO allocated significant funds in response to the Syrian crisis. It contributed to the improvement of living conditions for refugees, internally displaced persons (IDPs) and other affected populations inside Syria through a rapid response across five countries, in both camp and non-camp settings. ECHO also made important contributions to the setting-up of the infrastructure required for a large scale humanitarian response during 2012 and 2013. This included building partner capacity and presence in the region, developing needs assessment approaches and information tools and systems, and establishing coordination mechanisms at a regional level.

Among the donors, ECHO was one with a very strong regional presence. This enabled it to provide its partners with close support and advice on the basis of a well-informed understanding of the operational context in which they worked. ECHO also showed significant adaptability to the specific and evolving context inside Syria and its neighbouring countries.

Moving beyond the initial phases of the crisis will require significant attention in order to adapt to its protracted nature. Overlapping priorities emerge in this context, including the need for continued emergency response for those directly affected by the conflict and longer-term needs of displaced and host populations alike. ECHO will need to continue adapting its response to meet this evolving context, as well as ensuring good coordination with those actors best able to respond to longer-term needs.

### On speed and coverage of the funding

**In the first phase of the crisis between 2012 and end of 2013, ECHO made a considerable and important investment in the rapid scale-up of humanitarian aid operations in Syria and its neighbouring countries, which contributed to improved living conditions for affected populations.**

In 2012, in response to the outbreak of the crisis, ECHO immediately increased its funding to €156m. This was raised again to €357m in 2013; an increase of 129%. This rapid scale-up of funding allowed ECHO to contribute to the crisis response on two fronts. Firstly, it provided a cross-sectoral and multi-country response both in camp and non-camp settings. This assistance was found to be well targeted to the right beneficiaries and in line with the priority needs in the region, taking into account the contributions of other actors.

Secondly, ECHO made important contributions to the setting-up of large-scale humanitarian aid operations in countries where humanitarian capacities and expertise were either not present or not adequate to address the rapidly growing crisis. This phase of the crisis involved the opening up of country offices for several ECHO partners, the expansion of UN and NGO teams, the setting up of needs assessment approaches and information tools and systems, the definition of programmes and strategies, and the development of coordination

mechanisms. These processes has a considerable positive influence on the early stages of the crisis.

**Over the full evaluation period of 2012-2014, ECHO was the fourth largest international donor to the Syrian crisis. But the scale and geographical scope of the crisis challenged ECHO's ability to provide a transparently needs-based response.**

Over 2012-2014, ECHO was the fourth largest international donor to the Syrian crisis, contributing 8% of the total humanitarian contribution over this period. Its funding allocations per country varied considerably however, from €18 per refugee in Turkey to €237 in Jordan, without clear link to the humanitarian needs. Country allocations per refugee are inevitably impacted by many factors, including the cost of delivery in each country, the varying degrees of engagement of host countries and presence of other donors. This is of particular importance in the case of Turkey, where the government did not press international donors to intervene until 2015. Nevertheless, the link between these determining factors and the size of ECHO's response was not always clear.

The global response has not kept pace with the escalating humanitarian needs. UN appeals remained under-funded, forcing, inter alia, the World Food Programme (WFP) to suspend a food vouchers programme serving 1.7 million Syrian refugees in December 2014. Likewise, inside Syria, the number of people in need has grown at six times the rate of the global international humanitarian response from 2011 to January 2015.

**ECHO's funding levels fluctuated significantly over the period 2012-2014 without a clear link to changing humanitarian needs. The lack of predictability hampered programming and implementation.**

ECHO's funding allocations fluctuated over time, with the global amount (€163m) falling back in 2014 to a level similar to the one of 2012, representing a decrease of about 50%. This applied to all the countries individually (with decreases always above 50%), except for Turkey, where there was a slight increase.

Although in some cases the evaluation could link the evolution of funding allocations to the evolution of needs, globally the linkage to needs were not clear. ECHO conducted annual analyses of needs using the Integrated Analysis Framework (IAF) but this did not include an estimate of the level of resources required and there was no clear methodology to link IAF findings to the final budget level. Nor is the budget directly linked to the UN appeals process and response plans. Accordingly, some evolutions are difficult to explain, such as the budget contraction in 2014, in a context of continuing rises in refugee numbers.

ECHO did seek to mitigate the impact of these fluctuations on its programming partners. Firstly, by using contributions in 2013 to cover the first quarter of their partners' operations in 2014 (and, in some cases, the entire first semester). And secondly, by privileging support to international NGOs (INGOs) in 2014 to ensure that, where possible, their assistance was not disrupted (as opposed to UN agencies which have stronger cash flows).

Whilst the overall perspective has been to increase ECHO funds to the region since 2012, the fluctuations between annual allocations have been criticised both by ECHO representatives and partners, who underlined the difficulty of dealing with the lack of predictability of the funding. In neighbouring countries in particular, the reductions between 2013 and 2014 forced ECHO to focus on only the most direct emergency needs, and to significantly cut the number of supported partners. This made it harder for partners to address the resilience of refugee households in the context of an increasingly protracted crisis.

### **On adapting the response to unique features of the crisis**

The Syrian crisis presents the international humanitarian community with a unique combination of challenges and opportunities, stemming from a variety of factors: security risks; urban settings; an unprecedented scale; and the fact that the crisis concerns middle-income countries, with notably a different type of host government interaction. ECHO sought to tailor its response to these specificities.

#### **ECHO was innovative in supporting the large scale use of unconditional cash transfers to meet refugee needs in the largely urbanised, middle-income countries bordering Syria.**

ECHO supported the provision of unconditional cash transfers to meet the basic needs of refugees arriving in some of Syria's neighbouring countries. The use of this modality proved an efficient and effective way to deliver aid in the largely urbanised, middle-income countries bordering Syria, where the financial systems and electronic transfer mechanisms are well developed, and the markets can supply many of the diverse goods and services required. Despite strong ECHO attempts to unify the delivery of a single cash transfer to refugees, parallel systems persisted in several countries – with UNHCR providing unconditional cash transfers alongside WFP food vouchers. Nevertheless it was and is clear that not all needs could be met through cash transfers. Consequently, projects to deliver complementary goods and services, rightly remained in place.

#### **ECHO's support for remote management operations inside Syria enabled it to reach people in need inside areas controlled by armed opposition groups whilst mitigating the associated risks.**

ECHO helped to build the capacity of several partners to conduct operations through local partners inside areas of Syria controlled by armed opposition groups (AOGs). By developing and sharing guidelines on remote management, as well as conducting training workshops and amending monitoring requirements, ECHO was able to support operations inside AOG-controlled areas whilst mitigating the associated risks. This in turn allowed ECHO to maintain its independence by ensuring delivery of humanitarian aid in both AOG- and government-held regions of Syria.

#### **The humanitarian community is still learning how to adapt to urban crises, and the degree of adaptation to urban contexts varied considerably between ECHO-funded operations. The absence of a visible urban strategy looks to have hampered efforts to**



**ensure common standards are met across the portfolio or to capitalise on lessons learned from previous programmes.**

In 2016, the humanitarian community as a whole is still at the steep-end of the learning curve regarding urban response. In this context, it is perhaps not surprising that ECHO did not have a clearly developed strategy or set of funding guidelines for urban response during the evaluation period. Nevertheless, the absence of a strategic approach looks to have hampered efforts to ensure common standards are met across the portfolio or to capitalise on lessons learned from previous programmes.

Whilst some ECHO partners did provide examples of innovative responses to the specific challenges facing displaced populations and host communities in urban settings, the degree of adaptation to the urban nature of the crisis varied considerably between ECHO-funded projects. Particular problems were observed regarding the engagement of municipal authorities in design and implementation – a critical area of best practice emerging from the literature on urban response.

**ECHO's use of multi-country contracts facilitated the rapid scale-up of contracts in the early phase response, but hampered timely implementation of ECHO-funded operations from 2014 onwards.**

ECHO introduced multi-country contracts during the rapid scale-up of contract volumes in 2013. This reduced the administrative burden on ECHO desk staff and arguably sped up the contracting at a time when significant effort was required to scale-up the capacity for humanitarian action in the region. But as time went on, the use of multi-country contracts hampered timely implementation of ECHO-funded operations, creating unnecessary transaction costs and unwieldy administrative procedures. In addition, no real synergies were possible between country sub-components, which were by necessity implemented as separate contracts forced into one administrative dossier. The divergence in contexts between countries in the region meant that it was impractical for partners to implement single contracts across four or five different countries. Moreover, the combination of multi-country contracts and single-country desks within ECHO complicated the chains of command and increased ECHO response times for contract signature and modification requests. It further created a problem of accountability, with the signatory being held accountable for operations across the whole region whilst only actually following operations in one country. For these reasons, ECHO understandably reverted to country-specific contracts for 2015-2016.

**ECHO engaged with authorities in host countries, but was in a difficult position to deal with these authorities, which hampered its capacity to build a partnership with them to enhance the response to the crisis.**

There are several examples of ECHO and its partners engaging (for instance through advocacy) with authorities of partner countries and local structures with a view to facilitate the provision and coordination of support; to provide support to host populations; and to help host countries to provide support to refugees.

In some cases this engagement led to the expected results; in others not. Overall, several difficulties hampered ECHO's capacity to build a partnership with the authorities of the hosting countries:

- The host countries are all middle income countries, some of which with a solid capacity to deal themselves with refugees, and with sometimes specific policies (like the necessity to direct a share of the support to vulnerable host populations, even when there was no evidence that they were the most in need) that were difficult to deal with;
- The burden on the host countries was enormous, with very high levels of refugees to host, and with political repercussions on the willingness of host governments to host refugees.

This led to missed opportunities in terms of synergies between ECHO and Government support, and in terms of ECHO's capacity to influence host Governments who are key providers of assistance.

### **On coordination, advocacy and linking relief, rehabilitation and development**

**ECHO invested significant resources in high-level, regional coordination, the success of which was hampered by external factors. The decision to redirect resources towards more achievable targets was made too late. ECHO did however have greater success in supporting technical level coordination, through working groups and project-level information sharing.**

- Strategy-level coordination was hampered by the ambiguity between UNHCR's and OCHA's mandates in a Level 3 crisis that includes an intertwined set of refugee, IDP and host community populations. In some instances this led to complicated coordination structures and loss of potentially useful information-share. ECHO rightly identified this as a problem and sought to tackle it through advocacy towards the UN agencies in Amman and other countries. But ultimately, the inter-agency tensions remained, and UNHCR's success in leading coordination efforts has remained uneven across the countries affected.
- Moreover, ECHO's efforts to encourage a coordinated regional response plan further complicated the task of improving inter-agency coordination. The time and resource investments in this endeavour were high, and the return limited.
- Coordination between host governments and international humanitarian agencies was more problematic. In Turkey, notably, coordination between NGOs and the national and local governments was weak. This hampered coordination of the response for non-camp refugees and limited the potential for developing medium and long term response plans. ECHO had limited impact on improving NGO-government coordination, and appears to have had little traction in the coordination processes that exist between the government and UN agencies.
- At the technical level, ECHO contributed to coordination platforms and working groups in the neighbouring countries and at the regional level, which helped partners to increase project-level coordination.

**ECHO was recognized as a significant player in advocacy at a range of levels. But results were mixed, with notable difficulties regarding advocacy towards host governments.**

ECHO dedicated substantial efforts to advocacy initiatives at different levels of the organization (including the Commissioner level), on a wide variety of subjects (access, support to under-served areas, etc.), and targeting different audiences (UN, host governments, etc.). Stakeholders appreciated this role and ECHO had successes in this respect, but there were also examples of a less constructive dialogue between ECHO and host country governments, for instance on policy stances such as the exclusion of livelihood activities and inclusion of host community support in Jordan.

**ECHO, EEAS and NEAR sought to build a strategic burden-share to tackle a crisis that simultaneously presents short- and long-term needs. But results at the operational level remain uneven, and the higher level obstacles to tackling refugee livelihoods remain.**

The Syrian crisis evolved from a short-term displacement crisis into a protracted one. It now presents humanitarian donors with a broad spectrum of challenges, including both short-term and long-term needs simultaneously.

ECHO and the other EU institutions sought to build the framework for a strategic burden-share in the response: inter-service meetings aimed to establish the boundaries and objectives of the different EU funding instruments at play in the region; ECHO and the Delegations established Joint Humanitarian and Development Frameworks (JHDFs): the MADAD Trust Fund was created to allow European Commission and Member State contributions to be channelled together to tackle the intersection between humanitarian and development needs.

But the fruits of these strategic efforts have not had sufficient time to be seen at the operational level. Whilst some instances of coordination and burden-sharing between financing mechanisms were observed, notably in Turkey, in other cases they were lacking.

### **On dealing with the protracted nature of the crisis**

**ECHO has not yet adapted a strategy level focus on the protracted nature of the crisis, despite some progress in this respect.**

In 2016, the Syrian crisis entered its sixth year. The UN-backed political negotiations have yielded a cessation of violence, but the future of the conflict remains very difficult to predict. The response should therefore be equipped to handle the specific needs of a protracted refugee crisis, as well as the challenge of providing assistance inside Syria as and when possible. This situation creates needs on multiple fronts: i) tackling the ongoing emergency needs of directly affected populations; ii) building their long-term resilience and self-help capacity; iii) ensuring that host communities receive enough support to handle the long-term pressures on them. As a result, clarity on the burden-share between ECHO, other EU institutions, Member States and other actors is vital.

ECHO made some progress towards this goal over the period 2012-2014, for instance through the attention paid to the interplay between humanitarian funds and development resources. The Joint Humanitarian Development Frameworks, established at a country-level, have the potential to help clarify the burden-share between ECHO and other EU institutions, but over the period 2012-2014, this process remained in its infancy. ECHO worked also closely with other funding EU instruments to build a more integrated response to the crisis (for instance through the Instrument for Pre Accession in Turkey).

But weaknesses remained in this area, notably regarding the engagement of local authorities and host governments to allow refugees the right to work (ECHO and the EU Delegations have had limited impact on the policies of host governments with respect to refugee livelihoods); the predictability of ECHO funding levels for the Syrian crisis (cf. above); and the ability to support the resilience of populations inside AOG-controlled areas of Syria (the restriction of support to directly life-saving assistance for instance has been questioned by many partners).

## Recommendations

The evaluation makes a total of **5 recommendations** for the future response of ECHO to the Syrian crisis. Each of the recommendations are directed towards DG ECHO, although several require interaction with third parties to work together in order to improve the overall response.

**DG ECHO should provide, and/or advocate for the provision of, adequate and predictable resources to respond to the humanitarian needs of those affected by the Syrian crisis (R.1).**

The contributions of ECHO and other humanitarian donors have decreased sharply in 2014 and 2015, whilst at the same time the number of refugees has risen sharply. This has led to significant underfunding of UN appeals and cuts in assistance to affected populations. There have been calls for a significant revision of the international aid architecture in the Syria regional response, in order to address a future in which refugee populations are expected to stay high for the medium term. In this context, it is recommended that ECHO considers the following actions to facilitate adequate humanitarian funding in the Syria crisis:

- a) Allocate humanitarian funding in proportion to needs that have been visibly identified by ECHO through a transparent triangulation of available needs assessments including, but not limited to, the UN-led Strategic Response Plan.
- b) Actively seek additional voluntary contributions from EU member states to ensure that adequate funding for Syria does not adversely affect ECHO's ability to meet needs in other humanitarian crises.
- c) Make the best use of limited resources, ECHO should explore options for achieving cost efficiency savings through the provision of more predictable funding to core response agencies.

- d) Continue to work with other EC funding instruments to identify opportunities for complementary development financing of interventions to reduce the pressure on humanitarian resources – without compromising humanitarian principles.

**Further adapt the ECHO programme to respond to the specific context of the Syrian crisis (R.2).**

- Given the protracted nature of the conflict, ECHO should consider relaxing the current limitation in the remote management guidelines to limit interventions to life-saving activities. ECHO partners have now established close connections with local partners who have demonstrated their capacity to provide principled humanitarian aid in inside Syria. ECHO should consider funding livelihood support projects through remote management protocols where suitably justified (R2.1).
- Given the huge protection needs associate with the Syria crisis, and the importance of ECHO in supporting this sector, it is recommended that ECHO should further prioritize the funding of protection related activities. This should include dialogue and capacity building with implementing partners to ensure protection support can be delivered in a timely fashion. (R2.2).
- In a context of continuing violence and instability inside Syria further refugee outflows may be anticipated. ECHO should put in place a strong and flexible capacity to respond to the needs of new refugee caseloads (R2.3).
- ECHO should further promote the use of coordinated unconditional cash transfers to meet basic needs at scale. ECHO supported unconditional cash transfers in Lebanon and Jordan that covered a range of refugee needs in neighboring countries. Multi-purpose cash transfers proved both efficient and effective in meeting a basket of basic needs in the context of highly urbanized host countries with functional markets and banking systems. (R2.4)

**Focus on country level coordination and contracting arrangements, augmented by carefully prioritized elements of regional coordination (R.3).**

The value of the regional coordination structures has been limited and regional contracting inefficient. It is therefore recommended that ECHO reduces funding of regional coordination activities and focuses on coordination between various cross-border operation and operations inside Syria; considers investing in strengthening the capacity of UNHCR to discharge its responsibility for country level humanitarian coordination through an Emergency Response Capacity grant at the central level; phases out multi-country contract and replaces them with single-country contracts.

**Increase direct dialogue with the national authorities in the countries hosting refugees (R.4).**

It is recommended that ECHO systematically seeks to strengthen its relationships with host governments in the region through regular liaison meetings with national counterparts during the missions of ECHO civil servants, supplemented by periodic meetings with Field Experts. These meetings should notably be used to discuss related to advocacy for humanitarian space, improved coordination between ECHO partners and Government, the needs based approach etc.

**Build greater synergies with EU Delegations and other EC funding instruments (R.5).**

ECHO has made progress in building links to other funding streams, especially at the Brussels level. With a view to favour a closer integration, it is recommended to: i) strengthen the participation of ECHO in joint planning processes with the EU Delegations; ii) Build on best practices of integrated programming; build towards potential exit strategies for ECHO.

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