



Address by Nicolas Borsinger, VOICE President

ECHO Annual Partners' Conference

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CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Ladies and gentlemen,

Thank you for giving me the floor and in case I should get carried away, I want to start with the most important thing: I think I can really thank you deeply for the format of these last two days. Expressions of appreciation have already been made by several participants, but I am convinced I can securely express them in the name of the whole partners' conference: that partners have the chance to frankly exchange with you and all your colleagues in this "Question and Answer" session, which has lasted one and a half hour, is really greatly appreciated.

This year is the last year in my second mandate as President of the VOICE network, which means my last opportunity to address this important event. While preparing I read again my very first speech here in 2012. And believe me or not but I had the impression I could probably repeat half of what I said at that time. Key issues I referred to that intervention included: the next FPA (which became the 2014 FPA), the risk of instrumentalisation of aid and the EU comprehensive approach, as well as the issues of partnership, effectiveness and efficiency.

Does this mean that nothing has changed? Certainly not.

Let me first list the main changes with an impact on EU humanitarian aid I observed during these last six years:

- First of all: we saw a new Commission established and new management in DG ECHO (and I could probably say the same for many of our members!). With new management often come organisational changes, revived leadership and a new impetus to do things differently but better.
- The External European Action Service has established itself and is now running at full speed,
- and then there is the refugee and migration crisis.

In 2013 -2014 we were all confronted with the DG ECHO liquidity crisis which remains to me, one of the most challenging moments in my presidency. But probably it was also one of the most rewarding moments, given the collective and committed engagement we all put into it, to face the crisis together, seeking to limit the impact this had on our capacity to deliver humanitarian assistance worldwide and through intense efforts in EU Member States and in Brussels to overcome it.

Further, on the positive side, over the years I'm proud to be able to proclaim that VOICE members, through their advocacy, have significantly contributed to securing a growing budget line for ECHO and EU humanitarian aid, including the Emergency Aid reserve.

The World Humanitarian Summit was the first of its kind and for a network like VOICE, it has been a very exciting and major opportunity to work with other international NGO networks and bring the European NGO perspective into the global debate.

We were particularly pleased to see that the EU, with one voice, set an ambitious level of commitments at the summit, commitments very much in line with the European Consensus on Humanitarian Aid. On the latter, I'm even more pleased to observe that 10 years after its adoption, the Consensus continues to be a relevant policy document. Indeed, at an event co-organised a few weeks ago by VOICE together with the IFRC, ICRC, MSF and OCHA, the three EU Institutions, and prominently Commissioner Stylianides, all confirmed their adherence to the vision and objectives of the Consensus grounded around the humanitarian principles, a needs-based approach and the value of partnership for quality humanitarian aid. Let us never lose sight of what an essential reference the Consensus remains!

Now back to us: ECHO & us, its NGO partners: where are we at?

'Partnership is at the core of the implementation of humanitarian aid': and this is not me saying it but the Consensus (art 21) and 'the EU underlines its intrinsic support for a plurality of implementing partners' (here art 50). Our partnership with the EU and particularly with DG ECHO has been developed around shared values in line with our common normative framework: the Consensus on Humanitarian Aid, the Humanitarian Aid regulation and for NGOs the Framework Partnership Agreement.

Those shared values and our common goal to save lives are best reflected when we work in complementarity towards outside actors, for instance to influence non humanitarians and policy makers – be it for the EU budget for humanitarian aid but also when together we explain to EU policy makers what humanitarian aid is about and the importance of respecting the humanitarian principles and mandate.

Yesterday, I made a rather strong plea for us to be able to have more dialogue with the High Representative of the EU for Foreign affairs and Security Policy and the EEAS, because there are some things which ECHO cannot do but the EEAS can do. Proving the point, I had the opportunity a few minutes later to introduce the Deputy Head of the EEAS Prism Division to

one of the VOICE members who is confronted with a most serious problem in an African country - one which diplomats can most probably do more about than anyone else.

And this is one of the reasons why indeed, it is so important to have the EEAS on a regular basis at these events.

From an inward perspective, our partnership pulses into dialogue and conversations between ECHO staff and partners at various levels. We value ECHO's field network and competencies – we value the work of ECHO Technical Assistants on the ground, who support us to get access and gain acceptance. We welcome opportunities to share our assessments of the situation and support ECHO developing its strategies at country level, as much as we welcome when we have the opportunity to feed into ECHO guidelines on sectorial issues.

But we need to make sure such dialogue is maintained and systemically applied. We believe this is equally appreciated from your side and want to further understand how ECHO works internally – we feel we have insufficient understanding on how ECHO allocates its funding and selects proposals. We can be much more effective in our advocacy initiatives around the ECHO budget if we better grasp how these funds will be used. The recent ECHO cash policy is a good example: it is most challenging to implement the new cash approach if we have insufficient evidence that this is an approach that works and indeed ensures no one is left behind.

A crucial opportunity for more trust and strengthening our partnership will come in the next months to ensure the final outcome of the ECHO Evaluation, which could be discussed with us before you agree on the next steps and develop the EC staff working paper. It is my understanding that indeed, this is how ECHO plans the next steps, and I am glad to have the opportunity of expressing here how very grateful we are for that decision.

Now, let me come to a more difficult aspect.

The Efficiency and effectiveness Agenda & the Grand Bargain.

We have said it already; the quality of partnership is crucial. Not just for its own sake but because to a considerable degree ECHO's efficiency is intimately linked to its partners efficiency. The very first step to increase effectiveness and efficiency has to be the simplification of procedures, in the most practical and down to earth sense. This is exactly what I said 6 years ago in my very first speech. Well, despite much positive intention and some improvements in relation to specific elements of our contractual relation, I'm afraid simplification as intended has not been achieved!

What I find most difficult to swallow is the ongoing double standards applied by donors, not only ECHO but also by ECHO, applied to NGOs vs the UN agencies. I challenge anybody, any time to demonstrate the contrary. My first interventions on the subject were rather subdued, claiming for a "level playing field" meaning identical levels of demands in terms of

reporting and efficiency from UN agencies as from NGOs. I am going to be blunter today. Not only is it a question of equality between ECHO partners, it is also one of equity: making the greatest demands in terms of transparency and reporting to the smallest and most transparent recipients of funds, and the smallest demands on the largest recipients and least transparent partners, is not only inefficient but it is also deeply unfair. The greater obstacles to the necessary corrections admittedly lie at Member State rather than ECHO level. But it is precisely all the more important for ECHO to be constantly and significantly “ahead of the pack” on this issue, so that VOICE members can then relay our common struggle at national level.

The situation, instead of getting better is getting worse, also by the induced effects of something on which ECHO has no power; the staff reductions at ECHO. Facts are crude: ECHO needs to get increasing amounts of money “out of the door” with less manpower. A vicious circle kicks in, as the most natural course of action is to allocate fewer grants of greater amounts to the largest actors such as the UN. The beauty of it is that, as a result, there are also less reports to be read by diminishing staff. You might thus all the more understand my increased concern over double standards between UN vs NGOs that this is in direct contradiction with the Grand Bargain commitment to support front line responders.

On another plain; one cannot say in the same breath “leave no one behind” and “efficiency, effectiveness”: We are here to provide humanitarian assistance to the most vulnerable. Yes of course, in the most rapid and timely manner; Yes, in line with the needs and the demands of affected populations, and Yes, in the most transparent and accountable way. But if “leaving no one behind” is seriously on the agenda, just reaching them, often in remote places, has a cost, not even mentioning the question of quality.

Quality! Quality is certainly no less important than accountability. Or is it? Our sector has made huge progress in professionalizing itself. We have quality standards for everything! And we strongly defend the idea that we can further improve and continue to work in pursuit of quality humanitarian aid. But I have sometimes the impression that the efficiency agenda often makes us lose sight of what we really strive for. We cannot just become suppliers of humanitarian assistance assessed **only** on a cost-efficiency ratio.

Why? Because there are fundamental ethical limits as to how far to compare how much per beneficiary is spent, for which services offered, by x and y NGO.

Unless we want to develop Low Cost/ Low service Humanitarian Assistance? Of course comparisons need to be done, of course we need to know cost differences between contexts. It was mentioned this morning that sometimes operational costs can be 6 or more times higher and it was said that if it is properly explained it can indeed be justified. So let us certainly have analytical tools, but let us not lose sight of what we are meant to do.

The Do-no-harm principle should also be remembered: at a time when we are all looking for better ways to address the needs, when innovation has become a buzz word in the sector, when we ask the private sector to engage more, we should be extremely careful. Is it our job to develop new markets? Is it ethically unproblematic to give data of millions of refugees to

banks or to a government, especially one deeply involved in a conflict? Is it not an issue to let the private sector test new products on refugees simply because it's so inexpensive to do so?

The Grand Bargain has generated so many expectations: many of us (even non signatories) have already spent hundreds of hours on this initiative. Through this, we demonstrate our commitment to efficiency: and yes we see progress: cash assistance has significantly increased, more donors are providing Multi-Year Funding, the development-humanitarian nexus is finding its way inside the EU... but a lot more needs to be done. We see many donors doing all they can to label old things they were already doing as being 'Grand Bargain implementation'. We understand the temptation to do so but resist the consequences. There's resistance to making the necessary transformative changes. I understand there's a pressure from parliamentarians and taxpayers for demonstrating results and for more earmarking which goes against the commitment of the Grand Bargain to reduce the reporting burden. But can't we address this together, identifying the real barriers and define ways to sort them out? We need a road map at EU level to implement the vision the Grand Bargain has put forward for the international aid architecture.

Another big question: Are ECHO practices sufficiently aligned with the ambitious Grand Bargain goals set by donors and UN agencies? I have heard concerns, not only due to staff reduction, that maybe are less significant than they seem... that ECHO might not be as fully committed to implement the Grand Bargain as it has been before. I am relaying such concerns which reached me with great caution, and hope that they will be foremost considered as a tribute to ECHO and to the importance of seeing you firmly strapped in the cockpit. Transformations need time and given the driving force that ECHO has been over the past 2 years, your engagement is as important as ever. From a VOICE perspective, our partnership has already been instrumental to move this agenda forward and we remain engaged.

Finally, my last plea: may the upcoming revision of the FPA offer a true opportunity to think out of the box together, in true partnership as to how to implement the Grand Bargain to further improve the delivery of aid in a qualitative manner!

And now to my wrap up, which boils down to repeating three messages:

We have recommitted to the humanitarian consensus as it remains as relevant as ever!

Our mutual partnership is a crucial element to implement the GB!

We need to think together out of the box when it comes to the new FPA!

Last but not least, Mrs Pariat, I thank you for the last two days that were so relevant for all of us. Oh and how much in agreement we were yesterday, when we heard that you don't see the need to open the ECHO Regulation!

Thank you!