

Speaking points for address of Dominic Crowley, VOICE President

ECHO Annual Partner Conference November 20th, 2018

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Ladies and gentlemen,

1. Introduction

I have attended many ECHO partner meetings, but this is my first as the VOICE President, and trying to pull together the views of the very many VOICE members here is not easy. This becomes even more challenging when extended to ECHO's NGO partners, but the VOICE Secretariat has, as ever, sought to gather your inputs and I will try to reflect **some** of them. I hope to cover the main ones but I am sure that you will let me know if – or perhaps that should be **when** – I miss something vital!

2. Thank you

I would like to thank Mrs. Pariat for her constructive and frank approach to engaging with ECHO's partners. This meeting has raised and sought to address some of the key challenges that we face, but, as always, there could perhaps have been more time set aside to discuss some of these.

The opportunity to discuss issues is essential. Kathrin Schick and I have recently met Commissioner Stylianides and had two further meetings with Mrs. Pariat – the first a couple of weeks ago, and the second yesterday – and tomorrow the VOICE Board will meet with the Development Committee of the European Parliament. These meetings are vital in allowing us to raise issues in relation to the effective delivery of aid, and the role of NGOs in this.

3. 2019: important years for the EU and for the humanitarian sector

Over the last two days we have heard how transformative 2019 will be. At the **EU level** we have:

- the MFF – a key issue for VOICE and all of its members – and indeed for ECHO in terms of the budget allocation
- the drift to a more right-wing and anti-EU Parliament that seems likely to emerge from the upcoming elections – highlighting for all of us the importance of voting
- the new Commission, and a new Echo Commissioner
- and Brexit - and let us not forget that DfID delivered £1.5 billion of ODA through the EU in 2016 – 15% of the EU’s aid budget, so the seemingly likely departure is significant

At the **humanitarian level** – we have already discussed many of the issues:

- growing needs, displacement **and** – contrary to the intent of the Grand Bargain - budget gaps
- increased challenges of access, security and maintaining an effective operational presence
- more bureaucratisation, compliance demands, the undoubted joys of GDPR and the potential accumulated risks that may apply to it over time, all in a context of – for many NGOs - less public funding
- and of course the necessary growing awareness of the extent of the challenge in addressing PSEA and the issues encapsulated in the #MeToo movement

And all of this in a context where the rhetoric – and at times legislation - against NGOs is growing.

4. [*The words we use*](#)

Amidst the challenges that we face and the acronyms we deploy to address them, there have been a couple of simple, short words that seem to me to have been central to some of the discussions:

1. **Trust** – we have heard how ECHO needs to build trust with the European Court of Auditors and the Parliament’s Committee for Budget Control; and of how ECHO is vesting trust in its FPA partners – and potentially even more trust in its programmatic partners. But we have

perhaps spoken less about the need for us all to establish trust with the communities whose needs we seek to address, and how adherence to the humanitarian principles, and standards of behaviour in terms of SEA, are fundamental to this.

2. We have also heard a lot about **risk** – a word that is positively bursting with meaning and challenges: the *management of the risks* that we are all engaged in when trying to deliver aid in increasingly complex contexts; the *residual risk* that remains despite our best efforts, as the reality is that we are working in contexts where we cannot control everything – and indeed in some contexts where we really cannot control very much; the *transference of risk* – often security risk - to local or national partners, often when INGOs retain the *financial risk* related to the proper use of donor funding; and the *challenge of risk sharing* when we look to donors to recognise the limitations of what we can reasonably do when assisting those in most acute need.

Avoiding or reducing risk – including financial risk - is a legitimate and important consideration. But as we heard in the counter-terrorism session yesterday, if this becomes **the** – or even **a** - primary consideration in determining where and with whom we work, then we have lost a lot. We risk falling into the growing ‘health and safety’ culture that seems to imagine that life can be lived without shortfall, failure or injury, where we avoid doing what needs to be done simply because there are significant risks in trying to do it.

These deceptively simple words need to be unpacked, considered and addressed in their very many different aspects as we move forward.

5. [Working together to address joint challenges](#)

Because we are all working in an ever-changing context, where working together is of fundamental importance because the challenges we face are too many and too great for any of us to address individually.

- as the NGO community, we need to work better together to demonstrate and defend the added value of NGOs in the delivery of humanitarian aid. But we also need to work better with other key actors in the sector:
- with Echo as they proceed with the FPA – and to recognise that the European Court of Auditors’ report may yet have a considerable impact on that process, including - we understand – the call for greater transparency from ECHO’s NGO partners
- with other humanitarian actors – particularly the UN, the ICRC and the IFRC - on issues that affect all humanitarian actors
- and with all of the relevant ministries of the EU member states to ensure that they understand what humanitarian aid is, what it can achieve and why it must be supported

6. *The next FPA*

But for many of the NGOs here, the key issue is the new FPA – and the questions of what will it look like and when will it be released?

I would like to thank the FPA Watch Group and its Task Force for their sustained engagement on this issue over what probably seems to them to have been an eternity. Indeed, the VOICE Secretariat has estimated that, collectively, more than 2,000 hours have been dedicated to the consultation process to date, so the sense of eternity may be well justified.

In our conversations with Mrs. Pariat, we have made the case for deferring the launch of the new FPA to July 2020 to allow for adequate discussion and preparation on the part of both Echo and ourselves, and I would like to thank her for agreeing to take this suggestion into consideration. She has noted that there has been a long and constructive period for reflection, but now is the time for decision making and action.

We welcome the commitment to moving things forward in a constructive and consultative manner and look forward to engaging in this, and to receiving regular updates on the progress being made.

As Voice, what we want from the FPA process is:

1. a partnership providing more effective and efficient aid
2. a process that is simplified – and followed by other donors. The figures shared by ACH yesterday were stark, but I am sure that they rang true for many organisations: 40 different donors, and an estimated overhead of 15% to design, deliver, manage and report on these grants when no donor allows for that level of overhead, leaving agencies picking up the balance from their public funding. When the amount being spent on grant management goes up to €67 million, that is a lot of money that is not going to directly support beneficiaries.
It is clear that the ambition of the Grand Bargain is still some way from being met in terms of simplification and harmonisation.
3. in reality, the challenges to simplification seem to grow rather than reduce, and come from ever more sources – including counter-terrorism legislation, the reticence of banks to facilitate NGOs working in complex contexts, and now – potentially - the second Supra-national Risk Assessment (SNRA). As noted yesterday, we must continue to seek systematic exemptions for humanitarian aid that allow us to work effectively, and we welcome ECHO's decision to focus on the impact of counter-terrorism legislation on humanitarian aid during their tenure as co-chair of the GHD.
4. agreement on how best to achieve greater transparency - and we look forward to a discussion with ECHO on this. but we also recognise that there is a balance that has not yet been reached between the need for more transparency on the one hand, and the desire for simplification on the other.
5. finally, we would like to see the maintenance of a diversity of actors and funding models to address the diversity of needs and would welcome clarity from ECHO – ideally in the form of a policy document - as to whether local partners will be part of that diversity

To try to summarise, there are four main points:

1. We need to work together to be more effective and to highlight the added value of NGOs – local, national and international - in the delivery of principled aid
2. We seek continued close consultation on the development of the new FPA – and its related programmatic approach – and regular updates from ECHO on progress towards this
3. We must push in our member states for political support for the humanitarian aid budget in the next MFF
4. And we all need to vote in the upcoming elections – and hope that our votes make a difference!

Thank you.