



VOICE (*Voluntary Organisations in Cooperation in Emergencies*) is a network representing more than 80 European non-governmental organisations (NGOs) active in humanitarian aid worldwide. VOICE is the main NGO interlocutor with the European Union on emergency aid, relief, rehabilitation and disaster risk reduction. As a European network, it represents and promotes the values and specificities of humanitarian NGOs, in collaboration with other humanitarian actors.

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VOICE RESOLUTION: WHAT HUMANITARIAN NGOS ARE ALL ABOUT

VOICE GENERAL ASSEMBLY

Humanitarian NGO

A Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) is a non-profit entity independent from government that is organised at local, national or international level.

A humanitarian NGO seeks to save lives, alleviate suffering and preserve human dignity in the face of disasters caused by natural hazards and conflicts. Humanitarian NGOs provide lifesaving goods and services such as food assistance, shelter and medical care, as well as protection to crisis-affected communities. At the same time, they aim to increase the capacity of populations to cope with future disasters.

NGOs are the main deliverers of humanitarian aid

NGOs are indispensable in implementing humanitarian aid, delivering the vast majority of humanitarian assistance on the ground to affected populations worldwide. This is not always reflected in donor funding flows. In 2009, OECD-DAC countries gave 17% of their humanitarian funding via NGOsⁱ. The EU's Humanitarian Aid and Civil Protection department DG ECHO works with around 200 NGO partners which receive around 50 % of all ECHO funding annually.

"NGOs are essential to the humanitarian response as they deliver the majority of international humanitarian aid due to their field-presence and flexibility, often with a high level of specialisation."
([The European Consensus on Humanitarian Aid](#))ⁱⁱ

NGOs provide principled aid

Humanitarian aid is provided based on the fundamental humanitarian principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence. This means that human suffering should be addressed wherever it is found, solely on the basis of need, without discrimination between or within affected populations. Moreover, aid needs to be provided without favouring any side in an armed conflict and with no other (political, economic or military) objectives in mind. These principles are set out in the [Red Cross Code of Conduct](#)ⁱⁱⁱ which most professional NGOs adhere to. Abiding by these principles enables NGOs to provide support in sensitive operating environments, including in conflict situations.

NGOs are able to deliver humanitarian aid where it is most needed

No two humanitarian crises are alike. In an emergency, for example after an earthquake, humanitarian aid needs to reach the affected people quickly while at the same time being tailored to the specific needs on the ground. As NGOs are often already present, they know the local context. Furthermore, they work on the basis of professional needs assessments to reach the most vulnerable populations, which often brings them to situations far beyond the attention of the media. As a result, NGOs often work where few others will go.

NGOs have a wealth of specialised expertise

In 2010, 385 natural disasters occurred across our planet^{iv}. The great number and diversity of humanitarian crises worldwide requires a substantial amount of expertise, for example to ensure clean water and hygiene, to defuse mines, or to protect children. To be able to answer to the differing needs of affected populations, a diversity of professional humanitarian NGOs is needed.

"Seeing our partners' work has demonstrated beyond any doubt the value of diversity of partners because no conflict, no disaster is the same. In different environments different partners have comparative advantages, because they have been on the ground for a long time and they have adapted themselves to the local conditions." (EU Commissioner Georgieva)^v

NGOs work in close partnership with national and local civil society

NGOs by definition are rooted in civil society. They are supported by the citizens in their own countries, are founded on volunteerism, and often receive private financial contributions. Therefore, humanitarian NGOs such as VOICE members can act as an expression of European solidarity towards populations in crisis.

One of the main comparative advantages of humanitarian NGOs is their close work with communities and local actors. By developing partnerships in the management of humanitarian assistance, the disaster response can be based on local capacities and the most vulnerable people reached. National NGOs are often in the front-line of emergencies. Close cooperation with national and local civil society is also important for accountability.

"[NGOs] are also a direct expression of active citizenship at the service of the humanitarian cause."

(The European Consensus of Humanitarian Aid)

NGOs are well equipped to build resilience of crisis-affected populations

Working with local communities gives NGOs an opportunity to look beyond the immediate relief phase by supporting the capacity of affected populations to be better prepared and to prevent future disasters – to be more resilient in the face of an emergency. Similarly NGOs are well equipped to promote LRRD^{vi}. This means they can bridge the gap from short term lifesaving humanitarian assistance to more long-term sustainable development of societies due to their knowledge of local contexts and established links with local people, organisations and authorities.

NGOs are flexible and able to mobilise rapidly

In sudden onset crises, speed is crucial. Humanitarian NGOs have a commitment to act quickly to reduce suffering, and their operational and logistical structures are designed for rapid response. Often NGOs have worked in a given country prior to the emergency, which can facilitate rapid needs assessment and access to people in crisis.

"NGOs bring a lot of expert knowledge to the field which one could probably not mobilise with the same speed, dedication and level of enthusiasm any other way. NGOs deserve a lot of respect and gratitude for the good work they are doing."^{vii} (ECHO Director-General Sorensen)

NGOs seek to constantly improve the quality of their work

A natural concern for effectiveness of needs-based humanitarian aid arising from close contact with affected populations has been one of the drivers for the humanitarian community's longstanding engagement with quality and accountability initiatives, starting from a major evaluation of the Rwanda crisis in 1994. Examples are the [Sphere Charter and Minimum Standards in Humanitarian Response](#), [the Humanitarian Accountability Project](#) or the [People in Aid Code](#) for the management of aid personnel. At EU level, the Framework Partnership Agreement of the European Commission indicates a recognised capacity to carry out effective needs-based humanitarian assistance.

NGOs speak out on behalf of populations that do not have a voice

The concerns of crisis-affected populations are not always high on the political agenda. Through national and international NGOs, their voice is brought to decision makers. By means of advocacy and campaigning, NGOs aim to ensure that the needs and protection concerns of these communities are reflected in policy and practice. NGOs also play a critical role in creating awareness of forgotten populations and crises.

NGOs are cost-effective

Overall, humanitarian NGOs are considered to be efficient and cost-effective. A major reason why OECD-DAC donors work with NGOs is their capacity to deliver on objectives^{viii}. The key to effectiveness lies in an open relationship and dialogue between NGOs and the local community that ensures relevant projects and efficient means to achieve them. Often backed by volunteers and individual supporters, NGOs work on a non-profit basis. A non-bureaucratic approach enables low transaction costs and flexibility to adapt to changing environments.

i Global Humanitarian Assistance Report 2011, p. 40

ii The Consensus is the EU's policy framework on humanitarian aid, applicable across EU institutions and Member States, that sets out a common vision, principles and practices on how best to provide relief and prevent suffering

iii The Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) in Disaster Relief

iv CRED Annual Disaster Statistical Review 2010

v VOICE Out Loud 14 'Partnership for humanitarian aid'

vi Linking Relief Rehabilitation and Development

vii VOICE Out Loud 15 'Linking Relief Rehabilitation and Development'

viii OECD-DAC report (2011) 'How DAC members work with civil society organisations: an overview', p.15