

Evaluation of the European Union's humanitarian response to the Rohingya refugee crisis in Myanmar and Bangladesh, 2017-2019

Executive Summary

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Evaluation subject, scope, timing and purpose

This is the Evaluation Report of the DG ECHO-funded operations humanitarian response to the Rohingya refugee crisis in **Myanmar** and **Bangladesh** during the period 2017 -2019. The main users for this evaluation are staff at DG ECHO HQ and in **Myanmar** and **Bangladesh** with an understanding that forward-looking recommendations may also provide guidance for decision making by other stakeholders, notably other units in the EU Delegation and DG ECHO partners in both countries. Launched in 2020, this evaluation was conducted after the emergency phase had ended and DG ECHO and other donors were looking increasingly at how to transition to more sustainable interventions in operating environments that were not particularly conducive to self-sufficiency. The evaluation's purpose is two-fold. Firstly, it aims at providing an assessment of DG ECHO's strategy/approach. Secondly, the strategic recommendations resulting from this evaluation should help shape the EU's future approach to this crisis, and possibly to other crises of a similar nature.

Methodology

The evaluation was divided into three phases: inception, data collection and synthesis. Data was collected during a desk review, interviews, focus group discussions to be able to respond to the 11 evaluation questions described in the Terms of Reference (TOR) for this evaluation. Three case studies provide supplementary evidence and additional contextual information. The team had originally planned field visits to **Myanmar** and **Bangladesh** during March-April 2020, but these were cancelled due to travel restrictions and public health considerations caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The methodology was changed to a fully remote design, which included virtual interviews with community members conducted mainly by national experts on the team.

A total of 244 individuals were interviewed, including 42 displaced persons living in camps and 44 individuals from surrounding communities in both countries. Key informants included representatives from European Commission (EC) headquarters, DG ECHO field offices, European Union (EU) Delegations, government officials in Bangladesh, bilateral donors, United Nations (UN) Agencies, national and local authorities, international and local Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), and representatives of beneficiary communities. The team also carried out an extensive desk review of policy and strategy documents, other evaluation reports, reviews, studies, and other documents which included an in-depth analysis of a sample of 18 projects.

Most of the main limitations and constraints for the evaluation had been anticipated during the inception phase. However, the global COVID-19 pandemic was a significant unexpected constraint since it triggered a lockdown in Europe, Bangladesh and Myanmar after the evaluation had been launched, but before the planned field visits could take place. Most team members were able to draw upon their knowledge of both countries gained during previous assignments to contextualise desk research and remote interviews. The inability to conduct physical field visits did nevertheless make it more difficult to observe and assess contributions and outcomes of interventions supported by DG ECHO.

Preliminary findings and emerging conclusions were shared with the Steering Group for this evaluation following the data collection phase. A virtual validation workshop involving staff from DG ECHO, partners and other donors provided an opportunity to provide feedback on findings and the relevance and achievability of the recommendations in the draft report.

Summary of Findings

A summary of findings based on the judgement criteria agreed during the inception phase for each of the eleven evaluation questions and complemented by evidence from the three case studies is described below.

Needs assessment and design

Targeting of vulnerable groups was facilitated by DG ECHO's promotion of Accountability to Affected Populations (AAP), gender and protection, notably in **Bangladesh**, which helped in targeting vulnerability while still maintaining their multi-sectoral approach. Data collected during assessments and monitoring not only guided interventions supported by DG ECHO but also helped to increase coverage by regular sharing with other donors and humanitarian agencies through formal and informal coordination systems.

DG ECHO and their partners consulted affected populations through various channels. Sectorial surveys (nutritional surveys, food security assessments, Knowledge Attitude Practices (KAP), hydrological surveys, etc.) complemented the community consultation and engagement campaigns to reflect the communities' feedback. However, in some cases community consultations did not influence programming due to the policy environment. For instance, surveys in **Bangladesh** highlighted a strong preference for full or partial cash assistance instead of in-kind distributions, but government policies have discouraged cash transfers to the displaced Rohingya population.

Strategies adapted to context

DG ECHO's annual programming cycle was well-suited to the dynamic operating environments to meet lifesaving needs during the initial response. DG ECHO's detailed understanding of the context and needs allowed to adapt interventions to constantly changing operating contexts. DG ECHO promoted integration of gender and protection approaches to better address vulnerability and continued to support Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) interventions.

As the crisis has transitioned into a protracted emergency, DG ECHO's medium- to long-term strategy has been to contribute to the EU's multi-year Nexus action plan for the Rohingya crisis. Unlike many of their peers, DG ECHO lacked a multi-year strategy that clearly articulated their role in the Nexus response plan based on different scenarios.

Proportionality of Funding

The budget allocated to the Rohingya crisis was insufficient to meet the needs that DG ECHO intended to address, especially in **Bangladesh** during the early phases of the crisis. This limited the scale of DG ECHO's response for priorities identified in the Humanitarian Implementation Plans (HIP). Although not at the scale that field staff had anticipated, DG ECHO still did contribute significant funding to the response plans in both countries. DG ECHO's positioning in both countries as a trusted source of information and analysis helped to inform needs assessments of other donors, which helped to improve coverage of priority needs.

Alignment with policies and principles

DG ECHO's strategies and approaches in both countries were largely aligned with relevant policy frameworks and thematic/sector policies, notably in providing incentives to partners to design and implement their interventions using a needs-based approach which as far as possible integrated protection, gender and vulnerability considerations so as to be consistent

with humanitarian principles. There was a reasonable level of awareness of humanitarian principles and relevant thematic policies among DG ECHO partners in both countries, particularly with regards to gender and protection.

DG ECHO's emphasis on adherence to humanitarian principles was widely recognized, though some stakeholders felt that this approach at times provoked reactions that impeded practical solutions to meet needs of vulnerable groups, notably in **Myanmar** due to challenges faced by agencies in obtaining the necessary permits to access affected populations.

Coordination with other donors

DG ECHO played an important coordination role with humanitarian donors in both countries. It was perceived by its partners in both countries as an informed and constructive donor that encouraged a coordinated approach. It also played an informal facilitation and supporting role for UN-led coordination which was needed given the "non-traditional" international coordination structures authorised by the two governments (i.e. coordination led by multiple organisations).

DG ECHO's support for NGO Platforms in both countries also helped to ensure there has been a consistent NGO "voice" in coordination fora.

Nexus coordination

The Nexus approach been a catalyst for collaboration within the EU Delegation in **Myanmar** and, since 2019, in **Bangladesh** as it has proved a useful mechanism for developing a joint plan and responding collectively to this complex crisis. DG ECHO staff in both countries regularly participated in Nexus-related consultations and joint missions. DG ECHO's role in supporting the Nexus action plan for the Rohingya crisis had not yet been fully articulated, notably in the form of a coherent scenario-based multi-year plan.

There were some examples of concrete results from the Nexus approach, but available evidence gathered shows also that outcomes have so far remained limited in large part due to the operating context.

EU added value

EU Member State representatives in both countries viewed DG ECHO as a key partner due to its humanitarian expertise, the strength of its analysis and the fact that it is able to maintain a principled approach without being subject to the same pressures as an individual country. DG ECHO's informal humanitarian coordination role was appreciated by EU Member State representatives even if they preferred to fund and manage their own programmes. More broadly, DG ECHO was seen as a humanitarian agency with a strong advocacy voice who did not shy away from sparking debates related to humanitarian principles, even if the issues at times caused discomfort in these politically sensitive operating environments.

Achievement of objectives

Based on a qualitative assessment of outcomes while taking account of the challenging operating environments in both countries, DG ECHO was considered to have been reasonably successful in meeting its stated objectives. Contributions by DG ECHO and their partners have yielded more positive results in **Bangladesh**, where positive changes in lifesaving sector indicators, such as mortality rates and nutritional status, have been observed, based on the sampled projects. In **Myanmar**, "success" has tended to be measured in being able to mitigate against further deterioration in camps where IDPs have being living in sub-standard conditions by meeting basic needs.

Based on a representative sample of projects in the two countries, the majority (90% in **Bangladesh** and 80% in **Myanmar**) of DG ECHO interventions were found to have achieved their objectives in terms of coverage of targeted beneficiary populations. DG ECHO's progressively increased support for protection activities was seen as a key contribution in improving the humanitarian agencies awareness of protection issues.

Advocacy and communication

DG ECHO focused its advocacy efforts on improving AAP and community-based protection approaches, contributing to the evidence base to strengthen the case for cash and voucher assistance (CVA) and improving humanitarian access, which has been a particular challenge in Myanmar. DG ECHO has also joined other donors in advocating for longer-term solutions for displaced populations, including creating conditions that could be conducive to an eventual voluntary return of displaced Rohingya populations to Myanmar.

DG ECHO actively supported developing joint advocacy in both countries to ensure consistent messaging to governments and other key stakeholders, although policy environments in both countries have limited the success of joint advocacy initiatives. There were nevertheless some positive examples of joint advocacy initiatives where DG ECHO has contributed to creating evidence for unconditional/multipurpose cash options for refugees in **Bangladesh** and facilitating the development a common position by the Humanitarian Country Team (HCT) on the government's camp closure policy in **Myanmar**. Periodic missions to both countries by DG ECHO HQ staff, including some high-level missions, provided opportunities to communicate relevant advocacy messages at both country and global levels.

Cost-effectiveness

Much of DG ECHO's efforts to improve cost-effectiveness was at the selection stage of interventions when it attempted to avoid duplicating efforts, encouraged synergies and coordination.

A general lack of cost-effectiveness analyses made it difficult to assess the cost-effectiveness of DG ECHO's actions. The monitoring of efficiency and cost-effectiveness at the project level was inconsistent, with variable attention paid to cost-effectiveness by partners.

Restrictive government policies in both countries were a major impediment to improving cost-effectiveness. Access restrictions and administrative processes have resulted in delays or even suspensions of planning activities. In addition, obstacles to CVA, particularly in Bangladesh, and longer-term approaches have also reduced cost effectiveness.

The fact that DG ECHO is not by its regulations allowed to directly fund national NGOs limited options for reducing overhead costs.

Longer-term planning

Prospects for a safe, voluntary, dignified and sustainable repatriation of Rohingya refugees to **Myanmar** remained dim. The massive influx into **Bangladesh** put significant pressure on local resources giving rise to social tensions between the Rohingya and host communities, notably reduction in unskilled labour wages, shrinking water tables and environmental destruction.

Restrictive policy environments in both countries have posed significant limitations on sustainable medium- to longer-term planning and programming. While DG ECHO has continued to advocate for funding to support a coherent strategy that recognises the reality of a protracted crisis, DG ECHO has allocated most of its resources to meeting humanitarian needs,

particularly in Bangladesh where in a matter of few weeks close to 1 million people sought refuge from violence in Myanmar. Nevertheless, while 2017/2018 were mostly dedicated to respond to prevailing humanitarian needs, sectors like healthcare, nutrition, education and disaster preparedness offered more sustainable prospects for both host and refugee communities.

DG ECHO has nevertheless managed to facilitate the work of development actors, mainly through real-time information sharing and analysis. Exit strategies for DG ECHO in both countries remained a remote prospect due to policy and operating environments that are not conducive to an early and dignified return to **Myanmar**.

Summary of conclusions and recommendations

A concise summary of the conclusions and recommendations appear below. The complete set of conclusions and recommendations – supported by operational guidance - are listed at the end of this report.

Conclusions

Conclusion 1: DG ECHO support contributed to better addressing vulnerability by giving an increased attention over time to gender, education, and protection in its own support and through advocacy.

Conclusion 2: DG ECHO's annual programming cycle was well-suited to meet lifesaving needs in the context of the Rohingya crisis, particularly during the initial phase of the response. DG ECHO lacked however a longer-term approach adapted to this protracted crisis, although good progress has already been made in this direction with the development of a Nexus action plan.

Conclusion 3: DG ECHO's budget was not proportionate to the needs they intended to address, notably at the onset of the crisis, and the rationale behind the level of funding decided by DG ECHO was not entirely clear. Yet, DG ECHO played a significant role in the response by serving the most pressing needs and filling service gaps as well as by providing its overall recognised experience and knowledge across many sectors.

Conclusion 4: DG ECHO's strategies and approaches in both countries were aligned with relevant policy frameworks and thematic/sector policies.

Conclusion 5: DG ECHO played an important coordination and advisory role for humanitarian donors in both countries in the unusual context of coordination being co-led by several organisations.

Conclusion 6: DG ECHO provided added value to the overall response in both countries by using its in-depth understanding of humanitarian needs, analysis, and advocacy to support an interagency response to the crisis and through its important coordination and advisory role.

Conclusion 7: DG ECHO interventions generally achieved their objectives in terms of coverage of targeted beneficiary populations, and meeting Sphere standards in the nutrition and WASH sectors.

Conclusion 8: DG ECHO's advocacy has influenced humanitarian stakeholder approaches and interventions but has struggled to achieve the broader impact needed outside the humanitarian sphere.

Conclusion 9: The approach by DG ECHO Myanmar and Bangladesh to localisation and NGO coordination has been innovative but was ad hoc rather than strategic.

Conclusion 10: DG ECHO has taken steps to encourage cost-effectiveness among its partners but, despite examples of cost-effective behaviour, partners have been inconsistent in applying guidelines and their attention to cost effectiveness.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1: DG ECHO offices in **Bangladesh** and **Myanmar** should develop a multi-year strategy that aligns with the Nexus response plan for the Rohingya, adapting to the specific context in each country, using external facilitation and technical support as required.

Recommendation 2: When deciding on funding allocations, DG ECHO HQ needs to 1) clarify the rationale for funding levels, 2) improve the timeliness of fund allocations, and 3) ensure that DG ECHO offices in Myanmar and Bangladesh continue to receive sufficient funding to engage successfully in a multi-sector strategy.

Recommendation 3: DG ECHO should continue its innovative approaches to promote localisation via its funding and technical support to NGO coordination to ensure that NGOs continue to have an important “voice” within the humanitarian community while also creating incentives for collaborative actions.

Recommendation 4: DG ECHO Offices in **Bangladesh** and **Myanmar** should further improve the effectiveness of their advisory and advocacy role by building upon their areas of strength.

Recommendation 5: DG ECHO Offices in **Bangladesh** and **Myanmar** should improve attention to cost-effectiveness of interventions for the Rohingya crisis through facilitating improved application of cost-effective systems and approaches while ensuring that relevant community feedback is considered when reviewing project design and implementation.