

EVALUATION OF THE EUROPEAN UNION EXTERNAL ACTION

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

COMBINED EVALUATION OF THE EU'S HUMANITARIAN INTERVENTIONS IN THE SAHEL AND IN THE FOOD ASSISTANCE AND NUTRITION SECTORS 2016-2020

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FOOD ASSISTANCE AND NUTRITION SECTORS (2016-2020)

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This is the Executive Summary of the combined evaluation of the European Union (EU) humanitarian interventions in the Sahel and in the food assistance and nutrition sectors 2016-2020. The evaluation was launched by the Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (DG ECHO) in October 2021. The work was undertaken by ICF, with inputs from experts in the fields of humanitarian assistance and evaluation.

Purpose and scope

The **purpose** of this assignment was twofold: to assess the 2016-2020 EU humanitarian interventions in five Sahel countries – Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Nigeria (Part A); and to assess the 2016-2020 EU humanitarian interventions globally in the fields of food assistance and nutrition (Part B). **Expected results** of the evaluation included:

- Part A: A retrospective assessment of DG ECHO's interventions funded in the five Sahel countries and a maximum of five retrospective strategic recommendations to inform its future interventions there;
- Part B: A retrospective assessment of DG ECHO's interventions in the fields of humanitarian food assistance and nutrition (HFA & N) and a maximum of five prospective strategic recommendations in support of its global work in the area of HFA & N.

Methodological approach

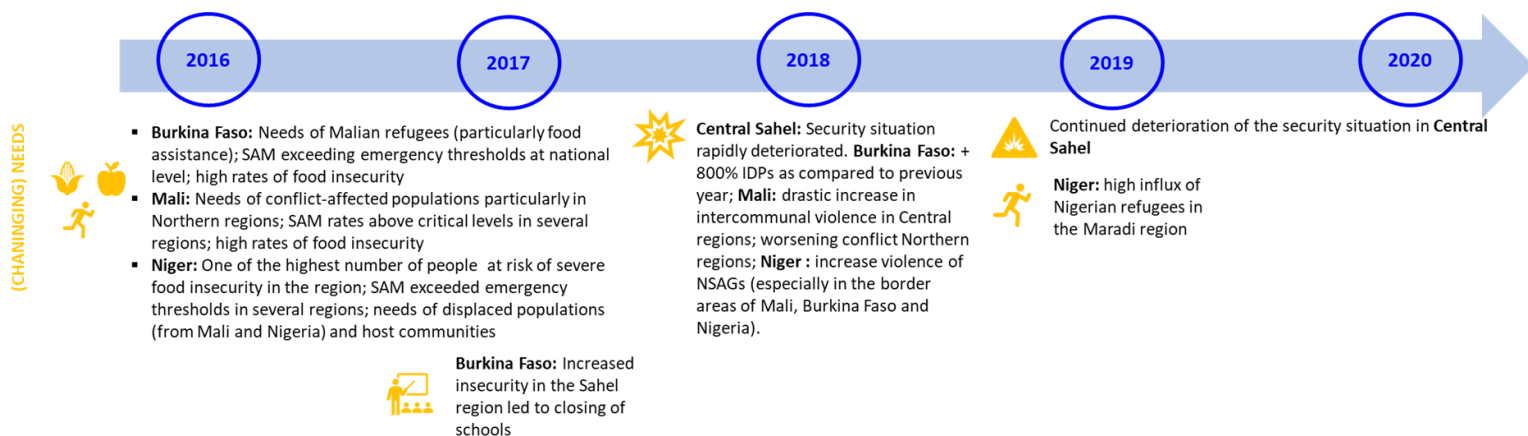
The evaluation was designed to respond to a specific set of evaluation issues and questions, as articulated in the Terms of Reference (ToR). A variety of research tools and sources of information were used to build a rich and comprehensive evidence base for this evaluation, covering a wide range of stakeholders. This included documentation review, data analysis, key informant interviews (KII), field visits, focus groups and workshops. For Part A of the evaluation, the evaluation team reviewed approximately 85 documents and documentation (SingleForm and FichOps) for 50 actions. ICF conducted a survey of DG ECHO framework partners operating in the Sahel region (46 responses). It also undertook 44 KIIs and conducted project site visits and field missions in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger. For Part B of the evaluation, the evaluation team reviewed approximately 185 documents and documentation (SingleForm and FichOps) for 50 actions. ICF carried out a survey of DG ECHO framework partners operating in the FSL and Nutrition sectors (86 responses). It also undertook 44 KIIs and conducted project site visits and field missions in Bangladesh, Niger and South Sudan.

Part A. Evaluation of the EU's humanitarian interventions in the Sahel, 2016-2020

Overview of context

Conflicts and the associated displacement, changes in political dynamics, climatic shocks, and economic disruptions continued to drive humanitarian needs in the Sahel countries. The humanitarian situation in Central Sahel (Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger) radically changed in the second half of the evaluation period. The end of 2017 and beginning of 2018 marked a major shift in the expansion of the Malian conflict to neighbouring Burkina Faso and Niger, leading to a growing number of displacements. In Nigeria, between 2016 and 2020, the security situation and the conflict dynamics in some areas in the Northeast changed dramatically, with the government re-gaining and then losing control some territory in the Borno state. In Mauritania, the situation remained relatively stable throughout the evaluation period, with recurring cycles of drought and exceptionally long lean seasons, creating high rates of food insecurity.

Figure 1. Main changes in the humanitarian context in Central Sahel



Note: *SAM = severe acute malnutrition.

In the evaluation period, DG ECHO responded to those needs with a total of EUR 850 million of funding (about 13.4% of the global humanitarian aid funding in the Sahel in the period), which reached approx. 107 million beneficiaries, making it the second biggest donor in the Sahel for the period (after the United States (US)). Most of that funding was allocated to the food security and livelihoods (FSL) sector (34%) followed by nutrition (25%), and health (10%). The total funding allocated to the region, and to each country, decreased in the period, in line with the evolution of the DG ECHO total funding. However, the share of DG ECHO funding to the region showed some fluctuations, increasing from 8% in 2016 to 10% in 2020.

Key findings and conclusions

The evaluation assessed the relevance, coherence, added value, effectiveness and efficiency of DG ECHO's interventions in the Sahel region between 2016-2020.

Relevance

DG ECHO's Humanitarian Implementation Plans (HIPs) adequately identified the most urgent humanitarian needs in the Sahel (sectors, target populations, etc.), both at regional and country level (from 2017 onwards). Its response in the region was generally well adapted to priority needs and adequately tailored to contextual circumstances and in-country needs and specificities (including changes in the humanitarian context and needs). In response to increased conflict and associated displacement in Central Sahel, DG ECHO adapted its approach from strengthening resilience to food and nutrition crises to primarily responding to the multi-sectoral needs of conflict-affected populations. The introduction and/or scaling up of new activities (e.g. rapid response mechanism (RRM), education in emergency (EiE), protection) to respond to changes in the humanitarian context was appropriate to address emerging needs. Nevertheless, DG ECHO and its framework partners faced some challenges in adapting their responses to the new humanitarian context, with the adaptation process proving smoother in some countries (e.g. Mali) than others (e.g. Burkina Faso). The evaluation confirmed the relevance of DG ECHO's priorities and response in Nigeria (particularly in the Northeast), as well as the overall adequacy of its response in Mauritania (including the preparation to phase out). Although from 2017 onwards, DG ECHO adopted a more country-focused strategy in the Sahel, the existence of regional commonalities was also taken into consideration by DG ECHO when designing its response (e.g. identifying three common response pillars in the region, funding multi-country projects, nutrition transition strategy, Global Alliance for Resilience (AGIR) initiative). Some stakeholders considered that DG ECHO could have adopted a more regional approach in the Sahel.

At operational level, DG ECHO was seen by framework partners as a flexible donor that allowed them to adapt (and scale-up) their actions to evolving needs (e.g. through the support provided to RRM, the use of crisis modifiers, modification requests). Despite this flexibility, some framework partners

required some time to adapt their interventions to the changing humanitarian context in the Sahel (e.g. shifting to a multi-sectoral response in Central Sahel and increased access constraints), mostly due to a lack of capacity/expertise in some sectors. DG ECHO's support at proposal stage and during the monitoring visits was key to adjust to these changes.

Overall, DG ECHO-funded actions were designed and implemented to take account of the needs of the most vulnerable populations, and DG ECHO invested substantial effort in reviewing and monitoring the extent to which actions were designed and implemented (i.e., needs assessment, targeting, logic framework) to address the needs of the most vulnerable populations. Framework partners generally had a good understanding of the humanitarian context in the countries where they implemented DG ECHO-funded actions, although the level of knowledge varied between partners and there were some gaps in sectoral expertise and capacity. Actions selected for funding were based on needs assessments that, despite varying quality, were adequate overall to identify the needs of the most vulnerable groups. Beneficiary targeting and selection criteria/processes were set out in DG ECHO-funded actions. Although the quality/adequacy of targeting criteria varied from one action to another, most framework partners used vulnerability criteria for selecting beneficiaries and consulted affected communities in the targeting process. Access constraints and insecurity posed some challenges in carrying out needs assessments and selecting beneficiaries in some of the Sahel countries.

Coherence

DG ECHO's response in the Sahel was aligned with its mandate as established in the European Aid Regulation (HAR). Notwithstanding some challenges, DG ECHO's response was also in line with the principles set out in the European Consensus on Humanitarian Aid:

- DG ECHO was a key promoter and proponent of a coordinated response. Although coordination capacities varied between framework partners, they all made efforts to ensure a coordinated response on the ground.
- DG ECHO was committed to integrating gender considerations into humanitarian aid (e.g. requiring its framework partners to use the Gender-Age Marker).
- DG ECHO played a key advocacy role in ensuring that military assets were only used as a last resort in the Sahel. Challenges were identified in some countries, however.
- DG ECHO and its framework partners were committed to respecting and promoting the humanitarian principles, the 'do no harm' principle and international humanitarian law (IHL). However, challenges were identified in fully applying the humanitarian principles in some contexts (e.g. the principle of neutrality in some regions of Niger, due to the imposition of armed escorts, and the principles of neutrality and independence in some areas of Northeast Nigeria, where framework partners were only allowed to operate in 'garrison towns').

DG ECHO's thematic and sectoral policies were adequately taken into account in the design of the Sahel HIPs. Funded actions were generally aligned with the thematic and sectoral policies, although some minor misalignments were identified by DG ECHO and discussed with the framework partners. The involvement of DG ECHO's thematic experts in the development of the HIPs, as well as in the selection of proposals and monitoring of funded actions, was central to ensuring alignment with the thematic policies.

In the context of the Triple Nexus, DG ECHO actively contributed to the coordination of efforts with governmental and development actors (including other Commission services and other donors) at planning and operational levels, and promoted cooperation mechanisms to develop a common strategic vision. However, some challenges were experienced in implementing the Nexus across the region (e.g. high insecurity and conflict in some of the Sahel countries, different programmatic cycles of humanitarian and development actors). Despite DG ECHO's efforts, the implementation of the peace component of the Nexus was heavily hindered by the security situation in the region. At operational level, most framework partners regularly participated in coordination meetings with national/local authorities and/or with development actors. DG ECHO regularly assessed and marked

the resilience level of each action at proposal stage. However, although most funded actions included measures to build local and/or national capacity, as well as advocacy activities, in some Sahel countries the overall sustainability of funded actions was limited, particularly due to the prioritisation of life-saving activities.

EU added value

Over the evaluation period, the EU added value of DG ECHO's actions in the Sahel region was demonstrated in a number of fields. The analysis of its funding in the context of global aid to the Sahel region confirms its position as a key donor in the region, which added value to the contributions of other donors, including Member States. DG ECHO's scale of funding was considered by framework partners to be one of the main distinguishing features of its intervention in the Sahel region in comparison to other donors. The evaluation also confirmed the added value of its interventions in the Sahel in several other areas, including:

- Its coordination role in the humanitarian response;
- Its wide geographical coverage (including hard-to-reach areas);
- Its key advocacy role in the Sahel region (notably, promoting IHL, the humanitarian principles and humanitarian access);
- Its presence in the field and technical expertise;
- Its flexibility compared to other donors, which allowed framework partners to adapt their responses to changes in needs;
- Its principled response – particularly its independence and impartiality – was also seen as an element of added value in its response as compared to other donors.

The evidence collected suggests that a majority of funded actions would either have suffered changes in scope/scale or not have gone ahead without DG ECHO funding. Only a minority of framework partners believed that their actions would have gone ahead unchanged with funding from alternative source(s).

Effectiveness

Over the period 2016-2020, DG ECHO funded 428 humanitarian actions in the Sahel region, to a total amount of EUR 850 million and reaching 102 million beneficiaries, surpassing the initial target by 16%. The evaluation found that, overall, DG ECHO-funded actions in the Sahel were effective to some extent, with multi-country and multi-sector projects being most effective.

While most of the activities, outputs and outcomes were effectively implemented/delivered and most targets were achieved, the funded actions were negatively impacted by challenges on the ground and most results did not last once the support ceased. The main obstacles to the achievement of results (outputs) and objectives (outcomes) included: security and access to areas/beneficiaries, COVID-19, staffing, logistics, lack of capacity of partners, and insufficient funding. The mitigation measures implemented by framework partners were not always sufficient to yield expected results and outcomes, as most of the challenges were linked to external factors, principally access, security and COVID-19.

Nevertheless, the evaluation found that DG ECHO interventions led to positive results, notably improved coordination, strengthened capacity at all levels (partners, authorities, local staff, beneficiaries) and improved beneficiary well-being. In addition, funded actions contributed to address key humanitarian needs and DG ECHO objectives of alleviating suffering and saving lives in the Sahel region over the period 2016-2020.

Over the evaluation period, DG ECHO encouraged the framework partners to strengthen the resilience of communities and support the foundations for recovery processes to the extent possible. Most of the actions implemented included measures to build local capacity (beneficiaries and local institutions) and support long-term strategies to reduce humanitarian needs, underlying vulnerabilities and risks. However, while some balance was struck between emergency and resilience

actions between 2016 and 2018, after 2018 DG ECHO shifted its focus to responding to emergency needs, scaling-down the scope and funding to resilience programmes and encouraging partners to prioritise life-saving activities over resilience (particularly in light of the changing context and security situation in Central Sahel and Nigeria). Despite this change in strategy, the evaluation found some evidence of funded actions' contributions to building resilience among the targeted populations.

Throughout the evaluation period, DG ECHO and its framework partners sought to coordinate their responses with relevant development actors, particularly by promoting coordination and collaboration with other Commission services (e.g. Directorate-General for International Partnerships (DG INTPA), European External Action Service (EEAS)) and other humanitarian and development donors.

Efficiency

DG ECHO was the second-largest donor to the Sahel region, contributing 10% of total humanitarian aid. It justified the budget allocations to the region and individual countries based on considerations including the overall internal budget available to the Sahel region, the humanitarian context and needs, the presence of other donors and the national and humanitarian response, the (un)availability of framework partners, and difficult humanitarian access. The size of the budget allocated for the Sahel and individual countries within the region reflected the needs to some extent, but was not in line with the evolution of those needs over the evaluation period. In fact, the needs increased, the funding requirements increased and other donors' contribution increased, but DG ECHO's funding decreased by 30% in absolute terms and 9% in relative terms.

The evaluation found that the actions funded by DG ECHO in the Sahel appeared to be cost-effective overall, based on the analysis of the cost per beneficiary, alpha ratio, and initial versus final action costs. However, the available data did not allow for a full assessment of efficiency. Over the period 2016-2020, DG ECHO encouraged approaches promoting cost-effectiveness and timeliness (integrated approaches, early warning systems (EWS), cash, RRM). The efficiency and cost-effectiveness of the interventions were systematically assessed by DG ECHO when selecting interventions and throughout the project cycle. In addition, framework partners took measures to ensure efficiency and timeliness in the design of the actions, but the most cost-effective approaches (e.g. cash) were not always selected for funding, as they were not necessarily adapted to the reality on the ground and could not be implemented. DG ECHO-funded actions encountered various obstacles with potential consequences for cost-effectiveness, notably the shrinking humanitarian space, growing insecurity, and COVID-19, but framework partners were able to implement mitigation measures to appropriately address obstacles in a timely manner.

Recommendations

Five key strategic recommendations have emerged from this evaluation.

1. DG ECHO should progressively complete the implementation of its exit strategy in Mauritania

It is recommended that DG ECHO progressively completes its exit strategy in Mauritania (following an adequate surveillance of the humanitarian situation) and considers relocating part of the funding to other Sahel countries facing acute humanitarian crises. The 2023 HIP should explicitly state the intention of DG ECHO to exit, and any funding allocation should focus on implementing that exit strategy.

2. DG ECHO could adopt a more regional approach to address common issues in Central Sahel (Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger) where appropriate

DG ECHO could consider strengthening its regional approach to address some of the common issues affecting the Central Sahel region (e.g. needs arising from conflict, insecurity and associated displacement), while maintaining a country-specific strategy to respond to the differentiated in-country needs and contexts. This would require careful consideration of issues/needs/sectors that could benefit from an enhanced regional approach, as well as the type of needs that could be better addressed through a country-specific response.

A more regional approach in Central Sahel could be adopted by, for example: emphasising existing regional commonalities and needs in the HIPs; encouraging framework partners to submit proposals for multi-country actions (where relevant); and scaling-up the funding provided to multi-country actions (where there is added value).

To reinforce its regional approach in Central Sahel, DG ECHO should review and strengthen enabling structures that can contribute to implementing an enhanced regional response (e.g. regional monitoring systems, regional coordination mechanisms, partnerships with organisations that have the capacity to implement multi-country actions).

3. DG ECHO should further enhance the centrality of protection in its response in the Sahel

It is recommended that DG ECHO further enhances the centrality of protection in its response in the Sahel by adopting a comprehensive (and where possible regional, see recommendation 2) protection strategy, including:

- Strengthening protection mainstreaming throughout the implementation of all sectoral interventions, by monitoring that the DG ECHO protection mainstreaming Key Objective Indicator is appropriately and comprehensively reported against;
- Ensuring adequate integration of protection considerations and principles in all funded actions by further emphasising this requirement in the HIPs, requiring framework partners to apply protection-sensitive vulnerability targeting, and giving greater attention to these aspects at proposal stage and during monitoring visits.
- Scaling up funding to targeted protection actions either stand-alone or integrated with other sectors, in compliance with its Humanitarian Protection Policy.

4. DG ECHO should draw on lessons learned from responding to a rapidly changing humanitarian context in the Sahel to better adapt its future responses

DG ECHO should consider:

- Expanding the scope of **crisis modifiers** to allow for changes not only in the geographical location of the actions but also in sector coverage, target beneficiaries, activity etc. to allow for more flexibility to respond to changes in needs.
- Better linking the support provided under **RRMs** with post-RRM interventions to ensure that acute needs are addressed beyond the first few months of displacement. Activities funded under RRM could be better linked with other parallel actions in order to ensure a comprehensive and coherent response.
- In certain circumstances, where framework partners are asked to rapidly adapt their responses to a changing context (e.g. changes in the security situation), DG ECHO

should consider funding some support costs (security equipment, training, etc.) to help its framework partners to **develop their capacity** to respond to the new humanitarian contexts.

- Consider increasing the share of **non-earmarked funding** in some contexts and for some partners to enhance the flexibility of the response, as highlighted in the Grand Bargain¹. It should identify situations where the benefits of increased flexibility outweigh the potential risks of lower accountability by the partner and capacity of DG ECHO to monitor the use of its funds.

5. DG ECHO should consider increasing its share of multi-year funding where appropriate

DG ECHO should consider increasing its share of multi-year funding to better respond to protracted and recurrent crises in the Sahel. Providing multi-year funding could enhance the possibility for framework partners to contribute to strengthening resilience and enhancing the links with development interventions in the context of the funded actions. Multi-year funding could also reduce administrative costs (linked to the need to submit, review and approve a new action proposal) and allow for better planning of interventions (through increased funding predictability).

Increasing the share of multi-year funding may require some adaptations in DG ECHO internal procedures, as its current procedures and framework are based on annual funding cycles and it cannot make multi-annual commitments to actions. Lessons could be drawn from the current Pilot Programmatic Partnerships (PPPs), which include multi-year funding and the possibility to use new financing modalities.

Part B. Evaluation of the EU's humanitarian interventions in the food assistance and nutrition sectors, 2016-2020

Overview of context

Worldwide, the prevalence of severe food insecurity continued to slightly increase every year in the period 2016-2019, before rising significantly in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. There was a steady decrease in the prevalence of stunting in children under five years old, although this trend reversed in 2019 and increased from 21.3% that year to 22% in 2020. The drivers and causes of food insecurity and malnutrition were many and (often) interlinked, including: conflict and violence, climate variability and extremes, economic slowdowns and downturns, and unaffordability of healthy diets. Their impacts were aggravated by poverty and inequality, as well as by the spread of COVID-19. Studies suggest a strong link between population growth and food insecurity, with countries with high fertility rates and rapid population growth having the highest food insecurity. In addition, persistently high levels of poverty and income inequality kept healthy diets inaccessible for about three billion people in every region of the world in 2019². In 2020, the global spread of COVID-19 triggered the worst economic recession since the Great Depression³, contributed to higher levels of

¹ <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/Quality-funding>

² Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), World Food Programme (WFP) and World Health Organization (WHO), *The state of food security and nutrition in the world 2021. Transforming food systems for food security, improved nutrition and affordable healthy diets for all*, 2021.

³ International Monetary Fund (IMF), *A crisis like no other*, 2020, available online at: <https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/ar/2020/eng/spotlight/covid-19/>

unemployment⁴, exacerbated existing poverty trends⁵, and caused a significant rise in food prices linked to supply chain disruptions, lockdown restrictions, and panic buying⁶. The pandemic exposed weaknesses in food systems and exacerbated food insecurity, with an estimated 320 million more people without access to food compared to 2019⁷.

From 2016 to 2020, a total of EUR 3.5 billion was allocated by DG ECHO to the food security and livelihoods sector (56.5%), the nutrition sector (26.5%) and the 'food component' of the multi-purpose cash transfer (MPCT) programmes (17%), worldwide. DG ECHO was the third major donor for food security and second major donor for nutrition globally. The funding allocated to these sectors and related projects increased in 2017 and 2019 and significantly decreased in 2020. This variation was somewhat in line with the evolution of the total funding of DG ECHO in the period. Nevertheless, the share allocated to food security and livelihoods reduced from 24% to 21%, while the share allocated to nutrition only had some slight fluctuations, with no clear trend. The FSL, nutrition and MPCT components of the actions funded by DG ECHO reached a total of 348 million beneficiaries across the world, most located in Africa and Middle East.

Key findings and conclusions

Overall, the evaluation found that DG ECHO's HFA & N response between 2016 and 2020 was relevant, coherent, effective and efficient. However, it was negatively impacted by the challenging context in which DG ECHO and partners operated and by the limited funding, which required DG ECHO to prioritise lifesaving actions over resilience-building actions, in line with its mandate.

Relevance

During the evaluation period, DG ECHO's programming and funding allocation in the HFA and nutrition sectors was based on comprehensive needs assessments at regional and country level. Its framework partners also carried out needs assessments when designing their specific interventions. The approach to these assessments was not standardised, as it depended on the humanitarian context and information available. DG ECHO and its partners generally relied on data from a wide range of sources and information systems. In the case of DG ECHO, this included data and analysis of needs on the ground by its partners and country offices. Programming-level priorities (region/country and population groups) were set using geographical criteria and standard HFA & N-specific indicators (e.g. global acute malnutrition (GAM) and SAM prevalence, Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC), Food Consumption Score (FCS), Coping Strategy Index (CSI)), although other factors (e.g. feasibility of working in the region/country, presence of reliable partners in the field, funding available) were also considered. DG ECHO framework partners employed a combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches to identify needs and target the most vulnerable populations, with many implementing participatory approaches. The evidence collected on the specific targeting criteria used by partners is relatively limited, but shows that in most cases, the selection of individual beneficiaries was based on age and gender considerations, combined with standard nutrition/HFA indicators and, in some cases, socioeconomic indicators. In terms of

⁴ In 2020, the global unemployment rate reached 6.5%, an increase of 1.1% compared to 2019 (United Nations Statistics Division, Sustainable Development Goal Number 8, 2022, available online at: <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2021/goal-08/>)

⁵ Between 119 and 124 million additional people were estimated to have reached the poverty line (population living below USD 1.90) in 2020 as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and related containment measures (FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP and WHO, *The state of food security and nutrition in the world 2021. Transforming food systems for food security, improved nutrition and affordable healthy diets for all*, 2021, pp. 64-65).

⁶ EDP, *Shedding light on changing consumer behaviour with economic data*, 2020, available online at: <https://data.europa.eu/en/impact-studies/covid-19/shedding-light-changing-consumer-behaviour-economic-data>

⁷ FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP and WHO, *The state of food security and nutrition in the world 2021. Transforming food systems for food security, improved nutrition and affordable healthy diets for all*, 2021, p. vi.

adequateness of the methods used by partners, the evaluation found that the perception among some DG ECHO officials is that the quality of the assessments varied considerably across partners.

Several challenges hindered the ability of DG ECHO and its partners to conduct their needs assessments. One common difficulty was restricted humanitarian access, which affected the quality and availability of data on the needs on the ground. Other limitations included insufficient funding and, in the case of DG ECHO partners, resource constraints and difficulties in complying with DG ECHO requirements. Despite this, the evaluation found that DG ECHO's strategy largely reflected the most acute needs on the ground and was adequately tailored to contextual circumstances, and that DG ECHO-funded actions were relevant to this strategy, with some exceptions.

Overall, the approaches of funded interventions for food assistance considered the context and were evidence-driven, but were also influenced by governmental restrictions and shaped by the modus operandi of partners. Both in the HIPs and, to some extent, through the field officers, DG ECHO promoted cash as a default modality where feasible, in line with growing evidence of the advantages of cash in empowering beneficiaries and enhancing efficiency and (possibly) effectiveness. In some cases, the influence of DG ECHO was limited by its relative weight as a donor compared to other donors with different stances. The approaches to food assistance considered the context and preferences of beneficiaries, but the modus operandi of partners also influenced the choice of approach/modality.

As for food assistance interventions, the approaches chosen to address acute malnutrition were generally context-specific and evidence-based. DG ECHO encouraged the selection of the most adequate approaches to treating acute malnutrition based on evidence, and fostered proven approaches, such as Community-based management of acute malnutrition (CMAM) and Infant and Young Child Feeding (IYCF), as well as alignment with national and international protocols, standards and guidelines. At the same time, it was mindful of the challenges in carrying out surveys, screening and delivery of treatment in certain contexts, and the response also included a set of newer and/or simplified approaches to overcome those challenges (e.g. simplified screening protocols, Mother/Family mid-upper arm circumference (MUAC), CMAM Surge, community health volunteers (CHVs)). The multi-sector approach to acute malnutrition encouraged in the 2016-2020 HIPs translated into the funding of a growing share of multi-sector actions during the evaluation period.

The evaluation found that DG ECHO and its partners demonstrated flexibility during the evaluation period, as they routinely monitored and adapted their response to changes in the humanitarian context. The main tools allowing for flexibility at programming and action level were the RRM, the crisis modifier, and financial top-ups. DG ECHO regularly monitored actions through monitoring missions and provided recommendations on follow-up actions to the relevant partner(s). Some room for further flexibility was evident. At programming level, the main limitation related to the length of the procedure needed to adapt the HIPs and the overall short period covered by DG ECHO's funding. At action level, the limitations mostly concerned insufficient financial flexibility, and limited DG ECHO support to some organisations participating in the RRM.

Coherence

The integration between DG ECHO's HFA &N programming, as well as the respective funded interventions, was limited and not systematic. In its strategic documents and HIPs, DG ECHO acknowledges the interlinkage between food insecurity and malnutrition, but there was no formal strategic and operational integrated approach to responding to both challenges. The limited funding required DG ECHO to focus on treatment of malnutrition, which is more closely linked to the health sector. Differences between the target population and targeting approaches of FSL and nutrition responses, as well as framework partners often specialising in one sector, reduced the relevance of this integration. Instead, DG ECHO (in the HIPs and in the field) and partners tended to promote integration between nutrition, health and, to a lesser extent, water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) responses, or they adopted a multi-sectoral approach. Funded actions in both sectors often integrated activities in other sectors, as stakeholders considered a multi-sectoral approach

complemented with targeted sectoral measures, to be the most adequate way to address the needs of beneficiaries.

DG ECHO and partners coordinated their HFA & N responses with other relevant actors and initiatives, and considered national policies and other programmes/actions where feasible. During the evaluation period, DG ECHO was involved in key global networks and initiatives in the two sectors, which influenced its programmatic response to FSL and nutrition. Through its participation in coordination mechanisms at national/regional level (clusters), DG ECHO and its partners contributed to a stronger alignment between funded interventions and other relevant responses/initiatives.

Given the context in which DG ECHO operated, there was limited space to align FSL interventions with the national/regional policies, which were often non-existent. On the other hand, nutrition interventions generally took the national guidelines (where available) into account and delivered assistance through/in collaboration with national health systems. In the field, DG ECHO also promoted and fostered coordination and cooperation between FSL and nutrition and other sectors. The success and intensity of these efforts relied heavily on contextual factors.

Effectiveness

Overall, DG ECHO's HFA & N response contributed to the achievement of most of its outcomes and desired impacts, but these may have not been long-lasting.

Most of the activities were effectively implemented and the majority of actions achieved their expected results (KRIs) and outcomes (KOIs), in spite of being negatively impacted by various challenges, most of which resulted from the difficult and volatile contexts in which DG ECHO operated. Various factors, such as regular monitoring (by DG ECHO and partners) and timely implementation of mitigation measures, allowed partners to address those challenges.

DG ECHO's HFA & N programmes made a strong contribution to improving food security and nutritional status among the beneficiaries (two Theory of Change (ToC)⁸ outcomes) and contributed to achieving the main desired ToC impact - saving and preserving life. An analysis of the achieved outcomes between 2016 and 2020 shows that DG ECHO-funded actions (supported by advocacy efforts of DG ECHO) contributed to improving food consumption and the nutritional status of beneficiaries and, consequently, alleviated suffering and saved lives, by:

- Increasing the percentage of 6-23-month-old children in the target population who received a minimum acceptable diet;
- Increasing the percentage of the target population with an acceptable FCS;
- Increasing the average CSI score for the target population,
- Increasing SAM recovery.

However, the limited funding available overall to address growing food insecurity and nutrition needs globally led to the prioritisation of lifesaving activities, outputs and outcomes related to provision of food/cash/transfer, and treatment of malnutrition over activities related to food utilisation, livelihoods and resilience-building. Consequently, the contribution of the DG ECHO's HFA & N programme in terms of protecting livelihoods and the increase of resilience was low, despite some good examples, such as the Global Alliance for Resilience (AGIR) initiative for the Sahel and West Africa. Opinions of stakeholders diverged on whether or not this was a missed opportunity, with some considering it the result of a programmatic decision by DG ECHO to use its limited funds to address the growing acute needs of the most vulnerable over activities to build resilience, in line with its mandate.

⁸ ToC explains how activities are understood to produce a series of results that contribute to achieving the final intended impacts. The process also explains how change is understood to come about, rather than simply linking activities to expected results.

Efficiency

Throughout the project cycle, DG ECHO and its partners considered cost-effectiveness took actions in that context. However, it is not possible to draw any firm conclusions on the extent to which DG ECHO-funded interventions were cost-effective compared to other feasible alternatives. When focusing on the efficiency of transfers to beneficiaries to address food needs, the analysis of the cost data shows that the cost-transfer ratio and alpha ratio decreased between 2016 and 2020, although not consistently. This suggests a slight increase in the cost-efficiency of the DG ECHO response to food security. Similarly, the comparison between the initial and final DG ECHO contributions and the evolution in costs per beneficiary per month suggests minor efficiency gains. These gains were mostly due to actions providing assistance to a higher number of beneficiaries than initially envisaged, within the same budget.

Various elements at programming level influenced the efficiency and cost-effectiveness of DG ECHO's response to food insecurity and malnutrition, including the promotion of cash instead of in-kind aid and the promotion of coordination and cooperation to explore synergies and the scaling-up of actions. Indeed, one of the main approaches used by DG ECHO to enhance the cost-effectiveness of its HFA & N response was a strategic shift from traditional in-kind distribution to cash-based transfers. Cash transfers were the most-used transfer modality and the analysis of the budgets of a sample of funded actions strongly suggests that this led to gains in efficiency, as the average cost-transfer ratio and alpha ratio of cash modality were lower than those of vouchers and in-kind transfers. DG ECHO and its partners made efforts (albeit not systematically) to scale-up actions to more beneficiaries and other areas and to explore synergies with other interventions. Some areas for possible improvement in cost-effectiveness were identified, including increasing the use of cash, supporting more effective and efficient procurement of goods and services, further coordination and synergies, improving targeting, monitoring and reporting systems, increasing localisation, and, in protracted crises, considering using shock responsive systems and crisis modifiers, as well as a no-regret anticipatory approach.

Sustainability

During the evaluation period, DG ECHO, within the remit of its humanitarian mandate, funded actions that aimed to support resilience-building, early recovery and self-reliance of conflict and shock-affected populations. Most of the actions implemented during the evaluation period included measures to build local capacity and support long-term strategies to reduce humanitarian needs, underlying vulnerability and risks. However, there were few possibilities for DG ECHO to enhance the sustainability of the HFA & N-funded interventions, given the limited funding available compared to the needs, thus it had to focus on its core mandate of providing urgent and lifesaving assistance. In the context of malnutrition, whenever the context allowed, DG ECHO contributed to improving national responses, as well as national health systems, through funding and advocacy.

Cooperation efforts between DG ECHO and development actors to mobilise the Nexus were successful to varying extents, and encountered several, mostly external, challenges. A key factor limiting the sustainability of DG ECHO-funded actions was the overall short lifecycle of its funded projects, with the implementation of PPPs perceived by stakeholders as a welcome step. Despite these limitations, DG ECHO sought to enhance the Nexus in interventions through its funding, advocacy and cooperation, with examples of successful interventions identified. For example, in 2016, DG ECHO developed a Nutrition Transition Strategy for the Sahel region.

Recommendations

Five key strategic recommendations have emerged from this evaluation.

1. DG ECHO should explore further opportunities to respond in anticipation of / earlier and quicker to crises considered highly likely to lead to food insecurity and malnutrition

As a one-size-fits-all approach is not appropriate to respond to a variety of crises, socioeconomic and cultural contexts, needs, etc., DG ECHO should further expand and use its toolbox of mechanisms and instruments to anticipate and respond earlier and quicker to events likely to lead to food insecurity and malnutrition. These include:

- Early warning systems (EWS: promote their implementation and improvement, as well as the use of the information collected to design the humanitarian response. Clear requirements on coverage, timeliness, and approach would be beneficial to assess the quality of the existing EWS and identify gaps. Funding the implementation and improvements to EWS could be considered to bridge the gap between existing and required capacity/quality.
- Anticipatory approach: explore synergies with some programmes/frameworks in the area by other humanitarian actors, such as the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA)⁹.
- Crisis modifiers triggering anticipatory actions and/or early responses: with flexible design in terms of their activation (e.g. predefined triggers or based on quick decision-making process) and scope/use (e.g. not earmarking funds for specific sectors, target beneficiaries and geographic area of the intervention).
- Better linking the support provided under RRM with post-RRM interventions to ensure that HFA & N acute needs are addressed beyond the first few months of displacement.
- Consider increasing the share of non-earmarked funding to some strategic partners and in some contexts: as highlighted in the Grand Bargain, this will allow for swift responses and increase efficiency¹⁰. DG ECHO should identify situations where those benefits outweigh the potential risks of lower accountability by the partner and the capacity of DG ECHO to monitor the use of its funds.
- Strengthen local capacity and promote community-led responses: this will allow faster reactions, as well as provision of aid to hard-to-access areas.
- Continue prioritising cash transfers where feasible, as they are quicker to implement.

The specific combination of instrument(s) to be used, should depend on the assessment of the context, type of disaster/crisis, available capacity, and funds (among other things).

⁹ <https://www.unocha.org/our-work/humanitarian-financing/anticipatory-action>

¹⁰ <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/Quality-funding>

2. DG ECHO should further promote and adopt a multi-sectoral approach to needs, complemented by targeted vertical interventions

DG ECHO can further explore and promote this approach when designing its programmatic response, for example by:

- Providing an intervention logic in the HIPs, highlighting the relationship between the needs, the various sectors, and the desired outcomes.
- Fostering proposals by consortia, or integrated proposals where each partner highlights the interlinkages between its own intervention and those of the other partners.
- Continuing to push for cash as a transfer modality, including seizing small-scale opportunities to use cash and promoting cash in combination with other modalities.

Interlinkages between DG ECHO-funded actions and the various partners could be further promoted, and through advocacy DG ECHO could also continue pushing for cross-sectoral dialogue, data-sharing/interoperability, joint needs assessments, and joint targeting for responses.

Finally, DG ECHO could foster internal inter-practice/sector dialogue and workstreams.

3. DG ECHO should strengthen supply chains

While many issues are not fully within the control of DG ECHO and its partners, some could be anticipated, based on previous experiences and lessons learned. In some cases, DG ECHO and its partners could take action to (partially) prevent and/or address these issues:

- Consider avoiding a unique supplier or source of supplies and exploring local suppliers: DG ECHO should find the right balance between exploring the economies of scale and efficiency gains that having a unique supplier brings, and the need to ensure that the supply chain is able to resist and respond to shocks. By diversifying the source of supplies/suppliers (including involving local suppliers), DG ECHO and its partners will increase their capacity to adapt to (and greatly limit the impact of) disruptive events, such as loss of cargo due to storage/transport conditions, blockades of cargo, difficulties in accessing areas of interventions, etc. Involving local actors will also contribute to the resilience of the humanitarian aid system.
- Consider promoting and advocating for more functional food markets, in particular by prioritising the use of cash modalities (including fostering market monitoring joint initiatives), and by ensuring access of populations to markets (e.g. mainstreaming protection of vulnerable beneficiaries).
- Consider promoting collective negotiations to increase the bargaining power of partners, for example the fees charged by financial providers or mobile solutions to transfer cash to beneficiaries.
- Work together with DG INTPA to strengthen the national transport and logistical infrastructure.

4. DG ECHO should promote livelihoods and resilience-building approaches in the context of the Triple Nexus, when feasible and appropriate

Opportunities to promote livelihoods and resilience should be explored in the framework of working with Nexus actors. In some protracted crises, DG ECHO together with DG INTPA and other development actors, could support resilience/systems strengthening and promoting the Nexus, for example by:

- Promoting resilience considerations in the target approach: in a context of limited funding, where equally vulnerable beneficiaries cannot all be covered by the funded intervention, DG ECHO and its partners could consider incorporating considerations related to individual/community resilience in the targeting approach.
- Adjusting the duration of humanitarian funding to allow for the implementation of an exit strategy (where feasible) and maximising opportunities to work towards a Nexus approach: in some cases, the relatively short duration of interventions (typically 12-18 months) was considered to have limited the implementation of an exit strategy. DG ECHO could consider scaling-up the current PPPs, as well as considering other modalities (e.g. prioritising follow-up actions).
- Promoting community-based approaches and localisation: this will build local capacity (including know-how) and increase the ability of communities to prepare and adapt more quickly to adverse events (see recommendation 1).
- Exploring the use of shock-responsive safety nets: where feasible, DG ECHO should link cash programmes with social protection as there is growing evidence of its potential to bridge the humanitarian-development divide¹¹. It could build on successful experiences like the Productive Safety Net Programme (PSNP) in Ethiopia and the Hunger Safety Net Programme (HSNP) in Kenya.
- Replicating the success of the Nutrition Transition Strategy for the Sahel.
- Promoting environmental considerations in the responses (e.g. management of waste).

5. DG ECHO should consider revising its Food Assistance Policy and Nutrition Policy

Those revisions should provide concrete guidance on the various elements of the previous four recommendations, including:

- Using the most adequate set of available instruments to act in anticipation of, and respond early and quickly to, events that are highly likely to lead to food insecurity and malnutrition crises.

¹¹ European Commission, *Social Protection Across the Humanitarian-Development Nexus: A Game Changer in Supporting People through Crises*, Tools and methods series, Reference Document N°26, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, 2019.

- Adoption of a multi-sectoral approach, highlighting interlinkages with other policy documents, detailing how/when it should/could be complemented by vertical interventions.
- Strengthening supply chains.
- Promoting livelihoods and resilience-building approaches in the context of the triple Nexus. This should be developed jointly with DG INTPA.

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