

# Influencer Europe

How European  
donors could drive  
much-needed  
humanitarian reform  
through strategic  
coordination

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**CHA**  
CENTRE FOR  
HUMANITARIAN  
ACTION



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## Abbreviations

<b>COHAFA</b>	Council Working Party on Humanitarian Aid and Food Aid
<b>DFID</b>	Department for International Development
<b>EC</b>	European Commission
<b>DG ECHO</b>	Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations
<b>EEAS</b>	European External Action Service
<b>EHF</b>	European Humanitarian Forum
<b>EU</b>	European Union
<b>FAO</b>	Food and Agriculture Organization
<b>GFFO</b>	German Federal Foreign Office
<b>HAC</b>	Humanitarian Aid Committee
<b>HCT</b>	Humanitarian Country Teams
<b>IASC</b>	Inter-Agency Standing Committee
<b>ICVA</b>	International Council of Voluntary Agencies
<b>IDP</b>	Internally Displaced People
<b>IFAD</b>	International Fund for Agricultural Development
<b>INGO</b>	International Non-Governmental Organisation
<b>IDP</b>	Internally Displaced People
<b>NGO</b>	Non-Governmental Organisation
<b>OCHA</b>	Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
<b>ODSG</b>	OCHA Donor Support Group
<b>ODA</b>	Official Development Assistance
<b>OECD</b>	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
<b>UN</b>	United Nations
<b>US</b>	United States of America
<b>UNHCR</b>	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
<b>UNICEF</b>	United Nations Children's Fund
<b>UNRWA</b>	United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East
<b>WASH</b>	Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene
<b>WFP</b>	World Food Programme

## Abstract

**Calls for reforming humanitarian action** are currently louder than they have been for years, fuelled by the “new normal” of multiple crises and the staggering number of over 300 million people in need each year. This heightened urgency is compounded by longstanding challenges, including the rise of fragile, authoritarian, and conflict-ridden humanitarian contexts, the ongoing debates around decolonisation and localisation, and the escalating humanitarian consequences of climate change. Adding to these challenges is the **increasing funding gap** for humanitarian needs, which significantly amplifies the call for reform. As a result, the reform debate has gained fresh momentum and a current focus, particularly among donor governments, who are increasingly scrutinising **questions of prioritisation, efficiency, and accountability**. **In light of these reform debates, influential European donor governments come into focus**, firstly because they represent nine of the top twelve global donors, with Europe collectively being the **world’s largest humanitarian donor**. This focus is further heightened by the upcoming elections in the US and related domestic political developments, as well as the limited engagement of new donors worldwide in the humanitarian field, which is expected to increase the significance of European engagement and coordination. At the same time, Europe’s foreign policy is perceived as **poorly coordinated and of limited strategic capacity**, whereas this is a relatively unexplored field in the realm of humanitarian policies. While international humanitarian debates have largely focused on operational coordination, humanitarian policy coordination of donor governments has been relatively neglected.

Against this backdrop, this paper examines the **status quo of European coordination of humanitarian policies** among the top ten European donors, exploring relevant **formal and informal coordination forums** and their **regional dimensions** in Europe and crisis regions. Building on the concepts of political coordination by Braun (2008) and MacCarthaigh/Molenveld (2018), the paper assesses the level of successful coordination in formal bodies such as COHAFA, DG Group, and the HAC, as well as informal bodies such as the Stockholm Group, the E6 Group, and local networks across three coordination levels: *informative*, *thematic*, and *strategic*. The analysis uncovers **structural weaknesses in European coordination**, examining **why political actors sometimes for strategic reasons choose** not to cooperate and identifying areas (such as humanitarian diplomacy, institutional nexus issues) where improved coordination mechanisms may have no short term impact due to conflicting political interests. Furthermore, the paper presents **ten recommendations for enhancing European coordination processes** and **five pragmatic proposals for thematic policy areas** where significant progress for humanitarian aid and much-needed reforms could be achieved in spite of political and institutional challenges. Progress in the outlined areas could lay the foundation and momentum for Europe to transition in the medium term from a multiple choir to an influencer of humanitarian policies and central reforms.

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# 1. Introduction

**Calls for reforming humanitarian action are currently louder than they have been in years**, reaching a new scale, particularly due to their impressive diversity. The challenges are tremendous, and the demanded reactions vary significantly depending on the perspective. However, **all actors**, whether small local non-governmental organisations (NGOs), UN agencies or top donors, **share one major concern: there is a dramatic shortage of funding**. International funding for humanitarian action is in danger of decreasing rapidly amid a new normality of multipolar crises and over 300 million people in need worldwide (OCHA 2023a). These people have little hope in a world of multiple conflicts and increasingly protracted crises, which is at a turning point in security policy that has largely been defined traditionally. It's a world facing rapidly increasing humanitarian consequences of climate change and so far, largely inconsequential decolonisation debates that raise questions of power at all levels of the humanitarian system. Who, then, could heed this increasingly louder call for reforms? Not only at the European Humanitarian Forum (EHF) 2024, currently the most

important humanitarian summit worldwide, are **all eyes and expectations directed towards European states<sup>1</sup>** and actors, in sum **the world's largest humanitarian donors**.

**All eyes are on European countries, the world's largest humanitarian donors**

The relevance of European actors and their commitments could increase even further, especially as the **United States (US)** may soon enter a **Trump 2.0 era** regarding its humanitarian and international commitment. The US has already substantially cut its 2024 humanitarian budget. Inevitably, European states will be the main governmental addressees when it comes to the question of whether it is possible to counter the daunting challenges of humanitarian action, both new and old.

Can a coordinated Europe, acting in concert, be the decisive force for reform that many actors, stakeholders and affected populations have long hoped for in vain? And can it fulfil its own, now quite fundamental, expectations

## Donor Europe: Nine of the Top Twelve

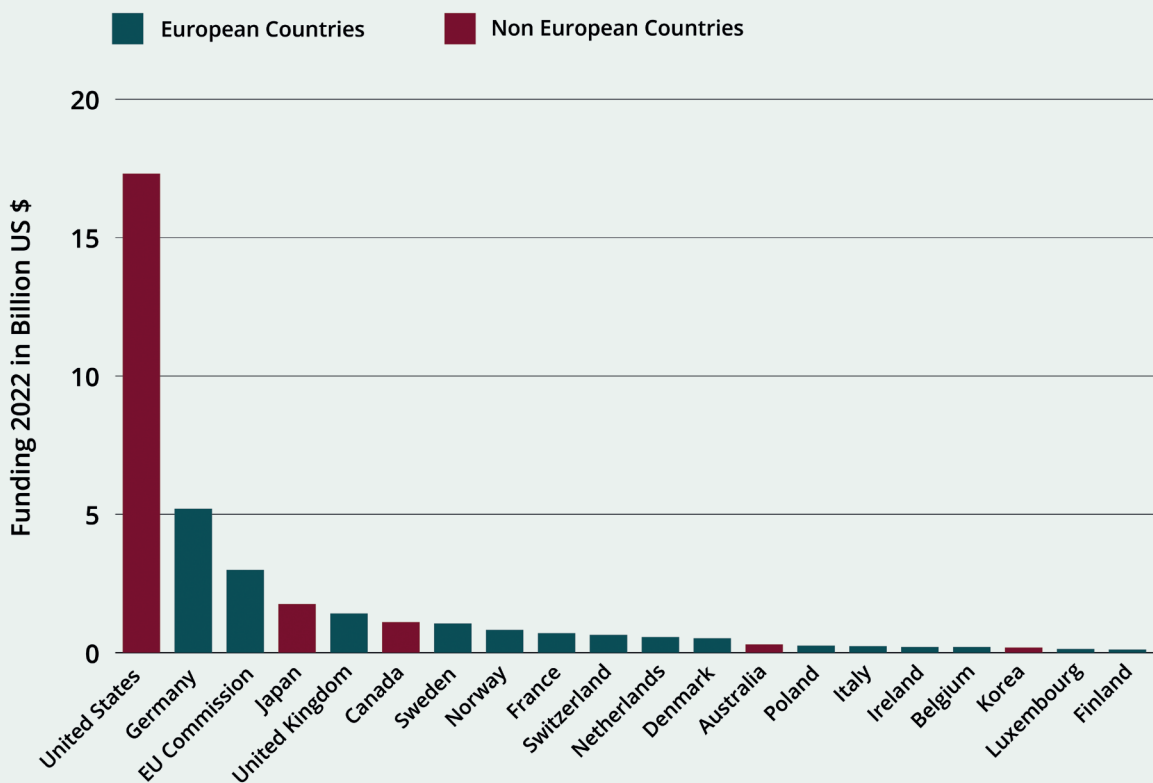


Figure 1: Humanitarian funding by the top 20 donors / Source: (OCHA | FTS 2024)

for reform in humanitarian issues? Speaking with government representatives from leading European humanitarian donors as well as the European Commission (EC), one hears the same buzzwords **in rare unison on goals and urgency**: more **efficiency** at all levels, more **prioritisation** on less levels of aids, the call for more **accountability** of all actors, and for **fundamentally questioning humanitarian mandates** and their extensions. There's also a push for a better division of labour and prioritisation, as well as a **reinterpretation of the humanitarian principles** as a whole.

Thus, Europeans themselves have set an ambitious agenda, with many figures and trends indicating their centrality in its realisation: **nine of the twelve largest donors worldwide are Western European** (see Figure 1). Together, EU member states, the EC and non-EU members such as the United Kingdom (UK), Norway and Switzerland account for over **43 per cent of global humanitarian funding** (see Figure 2), thereby surpassing the US. While international humanitarian budgets and Official Development Assistance (ODA) are shrinking or stagnating, the top 10 countries that are approaching or already exceeding the 0.7 per cent target are all European countries (see Figure 3).<sup>2</sup>

Recently, **several EU member states have countered this budgetary trend by enshrining in law** the deadline by which they must achieve the **0.7 per cent target** (see Chapter 2), while all hopes for an international diversification of the donor base continue to come to nothing



Figure 2: Share of global humanitarian funding by geographical groups 2020-2022 in per cent / Source: OCHA FTS 2024

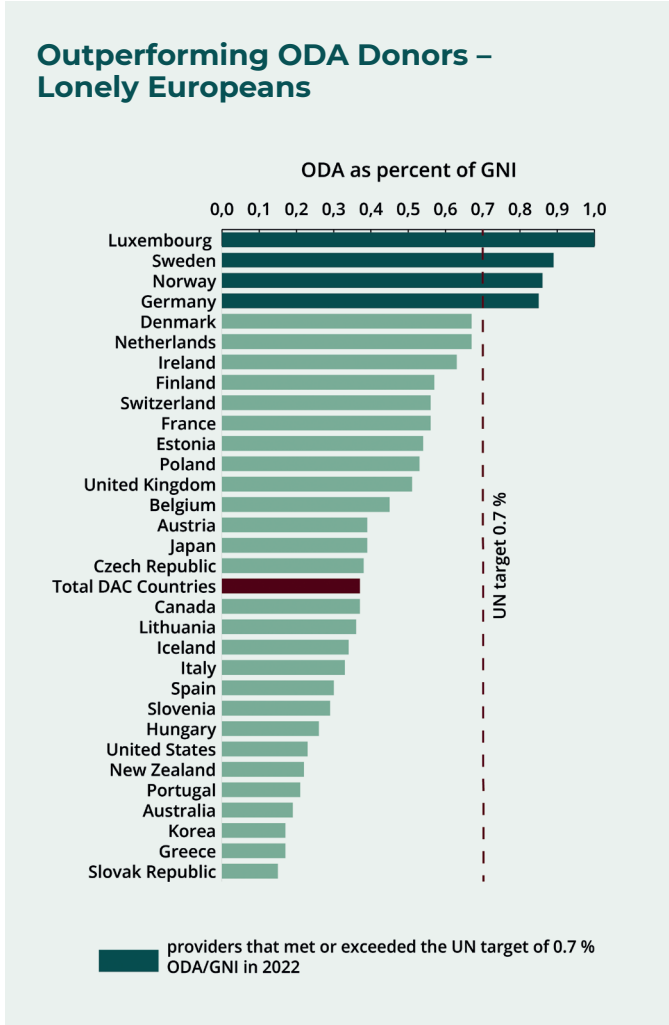


Figure 3: Ratio of ODA to gross national income (GNI) of the top 30 international donors / Source: Flourish and OECD 2024

(Benlahsen and Rodier 2023a, 4). Eastern European countries, hitherto hardly noticeable players in international cooperation and migration policy, have become more sensitised and financially far more committed than before as a result of hosting millions of Ukrainian refugees along with the geopolitical developments at their doorstep (see Chapter 2). So far, **most of the major humanitarian crises** of the 2020s, including Ukraine, have taken place **in Europe itself or its immediate neighbourhood** in the Middle East (Palestine, Syria, Yemen). In some cases, these crises have had far-reaching security policy implications, such as the *Zeitenwende* (turning point), and migration policy implications, which further reinforce the call for greater European responsibility. Only **coordinated European actors** can live up to this expectation, and many stakeholders see **significant untapped potential** in this regard.

“The coordination potential is tremendously underused on the EU level”, comments a European diplomat. A former director of a major European donor gives the official coordination mech-

**“In fact, donor coordination meetings are mostly chaotic and pointless.”**



anisms a devastating testimonial: "The scope for better coordination is today even more evident. Aid agencies often believe donors are a mysterious, aligned body. In fact, donor coordination meetings are mostly chaotic and pointless."

Calls for more coordinated international cooperation and humanitarian policy in Europe are certainly not new. In 2003, Lehtinen analysed EU development cooperation and humanitarian action, stating that "[t]he EU has so far failed to have an impact commensurate with its financial contributions, due to a substantial lack of coordination and complementarity between aid provided by the Member States and the Commission" (Lehtinen 2003, 8). However, initiatives for better coordinating international cooperation, such as the "Utstein Initiative" (Grefe 2013) organised by then German Development Minister Wieczorek-Zeul together with three EU colleagues in 2002, were strongly linked to individuals and eventually petered out. Further analyses in the literature selectively deal with the coordination of international disaster relief (Hirschmugl 2013), while the **coordination of European humanitarian action** is still a **surprisingly neglected topic** in analysis and practice.

The debate around international coordination processes is a constant companion of humanitarian action (Knox Clarke and Campbell 2016; HERE-Geneva 2020) and has recently regained momentum, as demonstrated by a confidential round table with stakeholders from the HERE-Geneva think tank, which made the subject a strategic priority of its work. Similarly, recent cooperation between major think tanks on leadership issues centred on the challenge of how improved coordination of humanitarian actors could facilitate change (GELI and CHA 2023). While **previous analyses have largely focused on the relevant issues of improved operational coordination**, far less attention has been paid to the policy coordination of state and political actors. Regarding Euro-

### Europe should be "offering the space for true innovative and disruptive thinking"

pean humanitarian actors, an initial debate has recently begun, raising hopes that there could be serious European efforts for change and progress in these times of perceived international change and crisis, including in the humanitarian system itself. Europe has "a unique capacity to offer a powerful and stable environment where (...) new solutions could be tested and operationalized", e.g. "by offering the space for true innovative and disruptive thinking", write Benlahsen and Rodier (2023a) in what is one of the first analyses on this topic.

However, why would the members of a crisis-ridden EU, a newly appointed EC in 2024, and a European Parliament that could experience a **right-wing populist surge** in the **2024 elections** and that will have a say in the renegotiated multi-annual financial framework, have the poten-

tial to make progress regarding all these challenges? What is meant by Europe's potential considering its **27 EU member states, which substantially differ on humanitarian issues**, as well as top humanitarian donors such as the **UK, Norway and Switzerland** located outside the EU? Could there realistically be potential actors in the concert of European states, which, according to critics, has **so far lacked composers, conductors and first violins**, while several other states are sitting neutrally in the audience at best? Is it possible to compose a powerful chorus with common lyrics and a catchy refrain from the often-lamented European polyphony in foreign policy (Wientzek and Rieck 2018)? In other words, could a European narrative emerge that could also go on a successful reform tour outside Europe? Or will this choir not always remain a naïve dream, especially in the most political and controversial international crises, where most humanitarian music is played?

Both scholars and practitioners agree that effective coordination between leading donor governments with the largest financial power is key to achieving progress in humanitarian reforms and policies. **So where does European coordination stand**, and can it enable European countries to make greater reform contributions, which are arguably needed more urgently today than ever before?

This paper serves as a **scoping study** to provide initial assessments, suggestions and proposals for action on the **question of whether and how an improved focus on more coordinated European humanitarian action** can be part of urgently needed **responses to the drastically growing challenges and humanitarian reform needs**.

## Method

To this end, the paper presents the findings from 28 semi-structured interviews with 8 representatives of European and local governments in crisis regions, 10 representatives of the European Commission (ECHO) in Brussels and regional hubs, 5 UN and 3 NGO representatives and 2 academics (including 11 women, 17 men) conducted from August 2023 to January 2024 in Brussels, Geneva, Cairo, Amman, Berlin, Rome, Bern and Oslo. The paper also draws on an analysis of the limited literature on European coordination (as opposed to local and international coordination, see HERE-Geneva 2021; Knox Clarke and Campbell 2018). Furthermore, the paper draws on the 40 interviews conducted for an earlier CHA analysis on Germany's role in international humanitarian policy (Hövelmann and Südhoff 2023), most of which also addressed the interplay between European and international actors. Several of these interviews were conducted in the UN hubs of New York and Geneva and with actors in humanitarian crisis contexts such as Syria and Lebanon.

Related **questions and levels of the analysis** are **extremely complex**, covering all levels of humanitarian coordination (local, regional, national, international as well as multi- and bilateral, inter- and intra-institutional, and so on), 45 states located in Europe, including their relevant actors, as well as the entire range of operational and policy-orientated humanitarian issues. Consequently, the analysis in **this paper needs to focus primarily on the actor-level coordination of humanitarian policies** among politically and financially **leading ten European donor governments, including the EC** (see Figure 4), which potentially possess the greatest influence and leverage due to their resources.

The paper follows the definition of political coordination according to Boston (1992), who explains that “Policy’ or ‘functional’ coordination is about the development of a clear, consistent and agreed set of policies, the determination of priorities and the formulation of strategies for putting these policies into practice” (Boston 1992, 89). As commonly used in political science (Painter 1981; Braun 2008), the term “coordination” is used in a broader sense encompassing dimensions that are occasionally defined as “collaboration” or “coadunation” (MacCarthaigh and Molenveld 2018, 661).

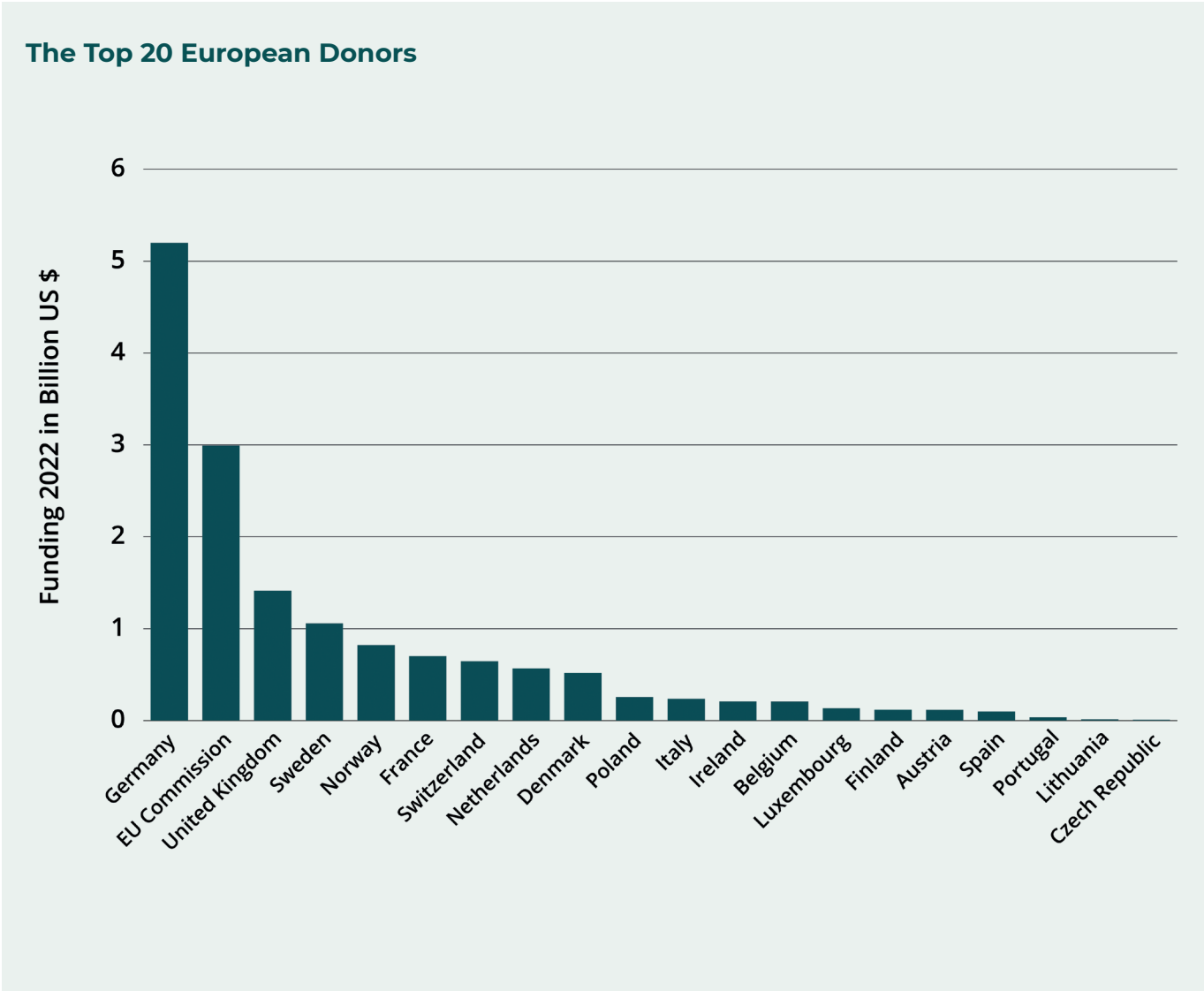


Figure 4: Ranking of European humanitarian donors / Source: OCHA FTS 2024

Drawing on the approach of “scales of coordination” (Metcalf 1994), this analysis follows the assumption that “coordination can be considered as a continuum scaled from independent decisions by organisations to the development of government-wide strategies, which require a high degree of coordination (and political

engagement) to ensure all parts of the bureaucracy are working towards common objectives” (MacCarthaigh and Molenveld 2018, 658). In this context, negative coordination, “leads (...) to the mutual adjustment of actors, but not to concerted action nor to cohesiveness of policies [positive coordination]” (Braun 2008, 230). In their

operationalisation, MacCarthaigh and Molenveld (2018) define nine levels of coordination: from levels 1 and 2 (communication and consultation) to levels 5 and 6 (search for agreement/arbitration of policy differences) to the highest levels of coordination (establishing central priorities and joint government strategies).

The following analysis draws upon Braun's definition of coordination as well as MacCarthaigh and Molenveld's measurement approach. However, to ensure its applicability in the context of this limited scoping study,

the levels defined by MacCarthaigh and Molenveld are **grouped into the following three categories:**

- **Informative coordination**  
(Communication and consultation)
- **Thematic coordination**  
(Search for agreement/arbitration of differences)
- **Strategic coordination**  
(Establishing central priorities/government strategies)

## 2. European actors as humanitarian actors

### 2.1. Finances

European governmental actors rank among the world's largest and most influential donors, collectively forming the largest international donor group. This trend has notably intensified in the last decade, driven not only by **Germany's swift ascent** from a minor humanitarian actor to the world's second-largest donor after the US. While this ascent, particularly following the influx of many Syrian refugees into Germany in 2015, can be attributed to specific factors and narratives (Kreidler, Hövelmann, and Spencer 2023), it also reflects a long-standing trend: **the UK** and the EU Commission/European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (ECHO), along with smaller European countries such as **Norway, Sweden, the Netherlands and Switzerland**, have a tradition of being leading international donors. With **France** also increasing its contributions, the majority of the world's top ten donors come from Europe. Moreover, the ten countries that come closest to meeting the ODA target of 0.7 per cent of their national GDP are all European, with **Luxembourg, Norway, Sweden and Germany** even surpassing the target in 2022 (see Figure 3 and Figure 5). Additionally, ten countries, nine of which are European and include smaller donor countries such as Hungary, Slovakia, Iceland and Portugal, allocate an **above-average share of their ODA budgets to humanitarian action** (see Figure 6).

**Ten countries that come closest to meeting the ODA target of 0.7 per cent of their national GDP are all European**

#### Seven of the Top Ten – European ODA Donors



Figure 5: ODA budgets of the top 30 international donors in US \$  
Source: Flourish and OECD 2024; OECD 2024

## European Focus: Humanitarian Action

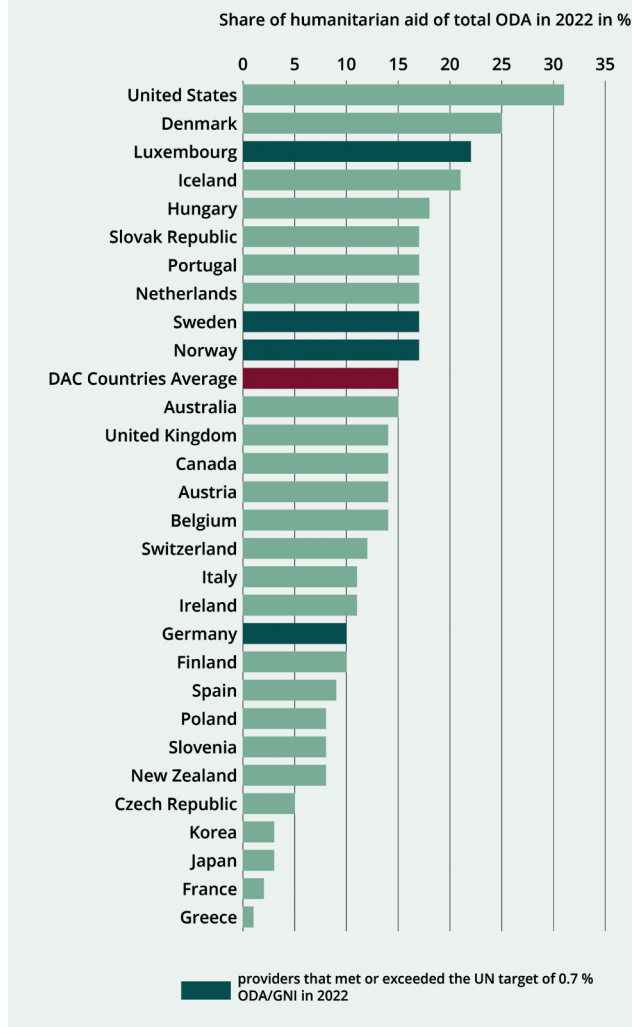


Figure 6: Share of humanitarian action as a percentage of total ODA in 2022 / Source: OECD 2024

These developments are more than a mere snapshot: Three European countries – **Spain, Italy and France** – have recently adopted binding **laws specifying when they intend to reach the 0.7 per cent target**, increased their budgets and in some cases established fixed minimum quotas for humanitarian action in their ODA budgets. For instance, the Spanish government has committed 10 per cent of its ODA to humanitarian action.

Moreover, the war of aggression against Ukraine brought **new momentum** to the involvement of **Eastern European states** in promoting greater humanitarian commitment. The reception of large numbers of Ukrainian refugees in neighbouring countries has led to a rapid increase in ODA spending by Eastern EU member states, which were rather reluctant to engage in international cooperation in the past (see Figure 7). “In many EU member states, there is currently a momentum that should be an opportunity for a broader humanitarian donor base within the EU”, commented one European diplomat, echoing the

## Countering the Trend - Increasing Humanitarian Budgets of European States

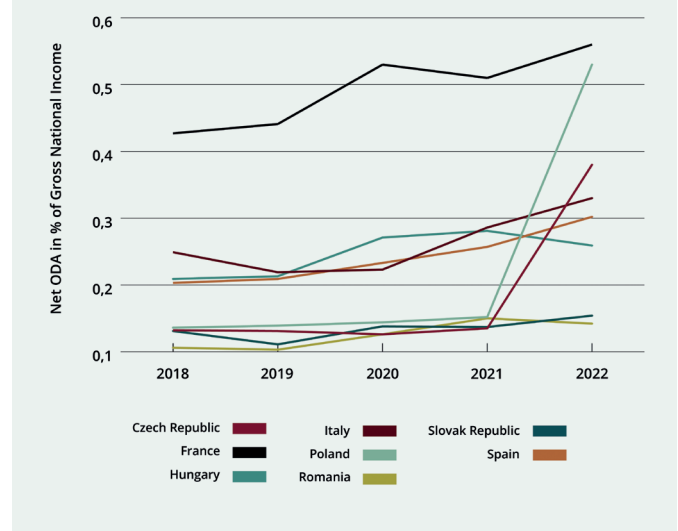


Figure 7: Ratio of budgets for ODA to GNI by state  
Source: OECD 2024

views of many of the representatives interviewed. Correspondingly, ECHO has recently organised several forums and workshops to broaden the donor base and made it a central theme of the EHF 2023 and EHF 2024.

Similarly, **international cooperation has gained new momentum** at the European level, driven by the challenges stemming from the war in Ukraine, particularly in terms of security, foreign policy, trade and raw material policies. Additionally, dependencies on China and Russia in trade have underscored the greater need for collaboration. One outcome of these developments has been the EU’s **Global Gateway Initiative**, which is strongly supported by Commission President von der Leyen and focuses on international infrastructure projects and commodity alliances in Asia and Africa. The Initiative is expected to mobilise **€300 billion** by 2027 with a significantly increased number of projects in 2024 (Furness and Keijzer 2022; Furness and Houdret 2021; Emmrich 2024; see Figure 8). As a result, Europe’s international cooperation could involve new players and gain additional dimensions.

## The Global Gateway Initiative could also marginalise traditional development and humanitarian policies

Simultaneously, an alternative interpretation of these trends suggests a potential downside. Depending on its design, the Global Gateway Initiative could marginalise or otherwise financially disadvantage traditional development policy and humanitarian action and mandates. One scholar interviewed warned that this could occur because “until now development actors are not on board of this

## Global Gateway - Multiplier or Threat to Development and Humanitarian Issues?

● 2023 (Total: 87) ● 2024 (Total: 138)

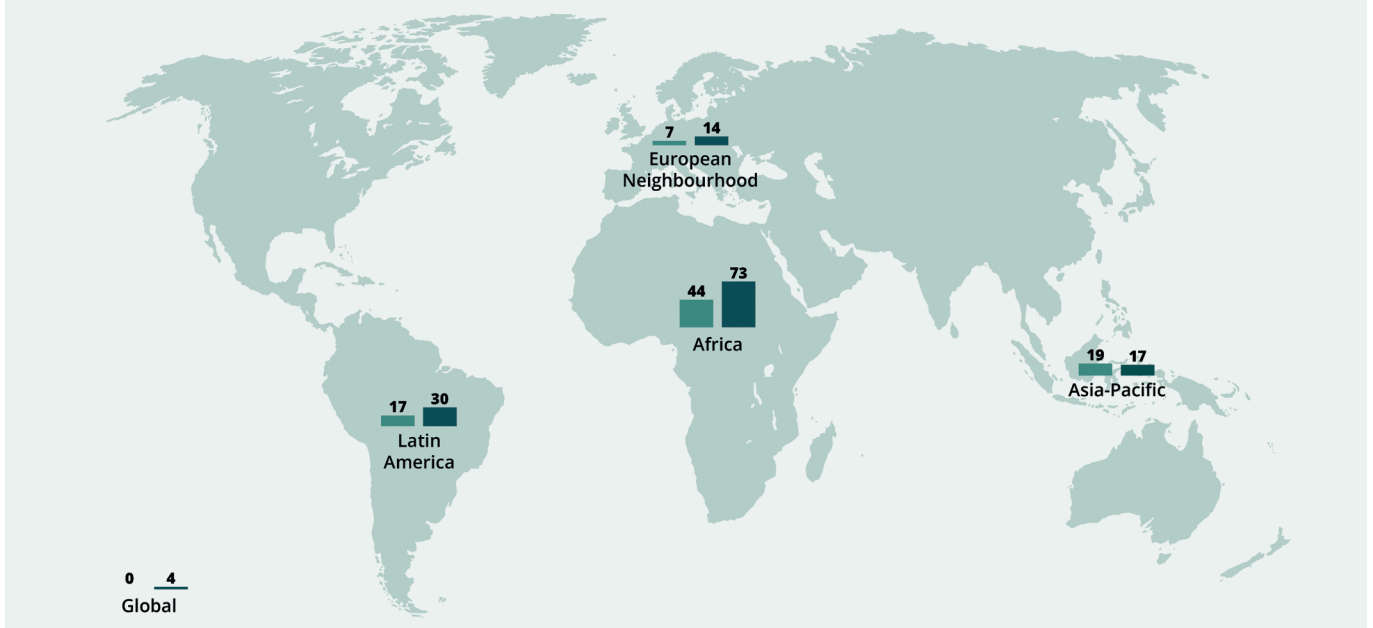


Figure 8: Expansion of the Global Gateway Initiative (number of projects 2023 / 2024)

Source: Emmrich 2024

process." Warning signs are also evident at the national level: **Germany**, a shining example of increasing financial commitment over the past decade, has reduced its development and humanitarian budget for the second consecutive year in 2024, albeit the latter from a record level of €3.2 billion in 2022.

Furthermore, despite the noted countertrends, the financial disparity between European donor states remains a major challenge as "current trends show that the risk of a two-tier system dividing EU members is growing" (Benlahsen and Rodier 2023b, 3). In fact, **only five EU member states account for 85 per cent** of the total European commitment (see Figure 9). Additionally, amidst debates on debt and migration in Europe and the emergence of right-wing populist movements, positive narratives regarding Europe's international responsibility could lose both political and financial leverage.

Nonetheless, **Europe maintains its position as a financial leader in humanitarian policies and priorities**, and its influence is **likely to increase rather than decrease** proportionally.

**Europe possesses substantial potential in the upcoming humanitarian reform debates due to its financial hard power**

Even if the cumulative financial commitment of European states stagnates or slightly decreases, Europe is likely to remain highly influential relative to other regions. This is particularly evident in light of significant budget cuts in

the US and the ongoing challenge of persuading states outside the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), such as India, China and the Gulf states, to make substantial, sustained commitments (Benlahsen and Rodier 2023a, 4).

This indicates significant potential for a coordinated European approach in the upcoming humanitarian reform debates, primarily due to the great European financial

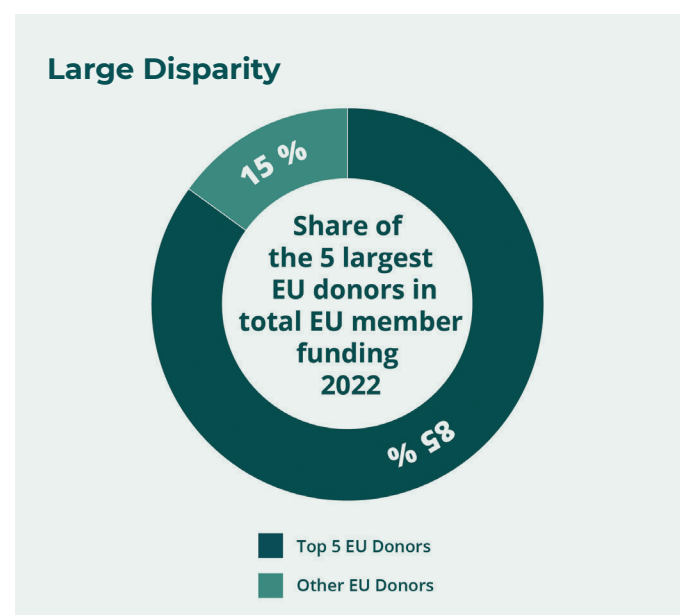


Figure 9: Share of the 5 largest EU donors in EU funding in per cent

Source: OCHA FTS 2024



hard power (Voss-Wittig 2006). However, intra-European coordination faces a structural dilemma among its top donors: **three of the largest European donors - the UK, Norway and Switzerland - are not EU members** and thus not engaged in EU processes. This fragmenta-

tion, with its distinction between EU internal and external processes, is also evident in the following assessments of the influence and humanitarian approaches of European donors.

## 2.2. European humanitarian donors – Roles, profiles, policies

The relevance of European states in shaping humanitarian action and fundamental foreign policy issues has often been discussed but rarely measured and analysed. A 2022 CHA survey provides initial indications of the unilateral potential of European states and their influence: around 200 international experts surveyed considered the EC and **the UK** to be the most influential

actors after the US, followed by a group of three countries considered middle powers: **Germany, Norway and Sweden** (see Figure 10).

At the same time, there is a widespread feeling of insufficient progress and unwillingness to reform in the sector, as analyses of international reform processes

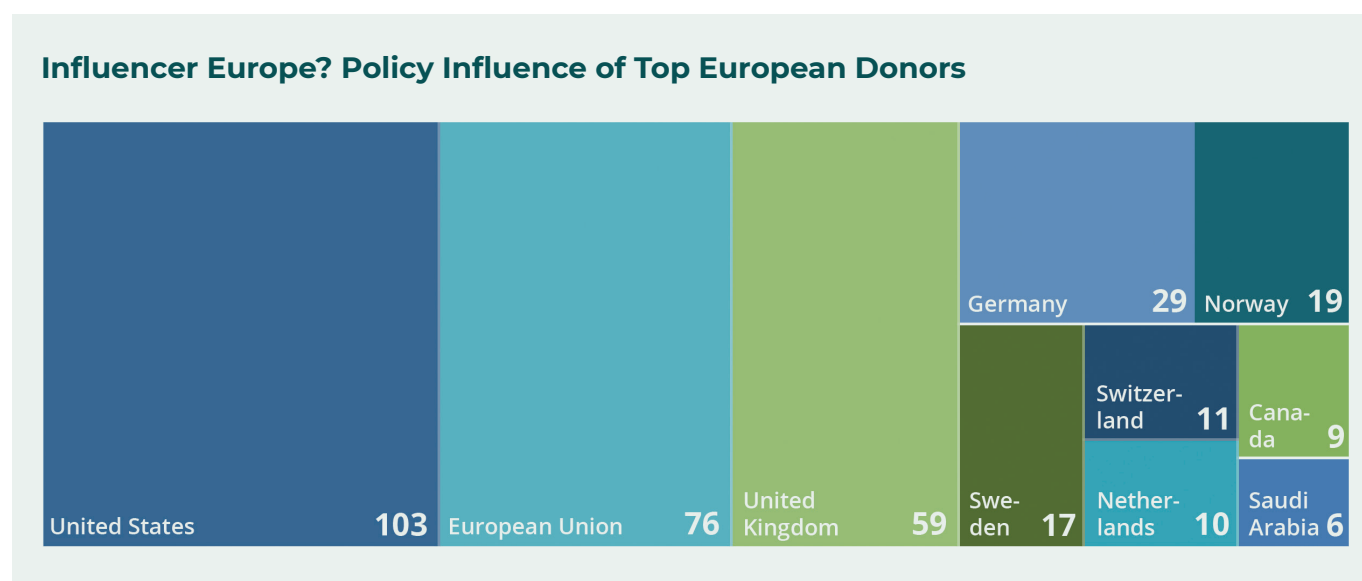


Figure 10: CHA Survey: "How influential do you perceive the following donors in shaping humanitarian policy?" / Source: Hövelmann and Südhoff 2023 - a non-representative survey of 200 international humanitarian stakeholders (Figure is based on the answer "very influential" - multiple answers possible)

and forums make clear (see Chapter 4). In a recent, non-representative survey on the humanitarian outlook for 2024, the most frequently chosen answer was: "Sense of dread. Needs are only rising, reforms the sector has tried to make for years have not worked, and I'm pretty pessimistic that things will get better."<sup>3</sup> Given this imbalance between considerable influence and agreed reform needs on the one hand, and an almost unanimously recognised lack of progress on the other, what role do leading European actors play?

The approaches of European states to engage in and shape humanitarian debates are highly diverse, yet their interactions have received little analysis. The issue of a

**Key challenges are internal contestation, regional fragmentation and multipolar competition**

more coherent and effective European foreign policy has been discussed for years (Lehne 2022; Cramer and Franke 2021; Finke 2018), with key

challenges such as internal contestation, regional fragmentation and multipolar competition remaining (van Bentum et al. 2023). However, humanitarian action has played little or no role in this context. Brower and Rodier published one of the first papers to raise the issue of a coherent, coordinated European humanitarian policy only a few years ago (Brouwer and Rodier 2021).

Challenges in this field arise from **highly diverse approaches to humanitarian structures, strategies and principle-orientation**, even among European actors who are often regarded as like-minded donors.

### Strategic approaches of European humanitarian donors

In terms of their **strategic approach**, only two actors possess the ambition and resources to address all pertinent humanitarian **policy issues comprehensively and to delve deeply into priority concerns**: the EC and

**the UK.** International stakeholders have been hopeful that **Germany**, as the second-largest donor, will play a similar role, but thus far, it has only been able to fulfil these expectations to a limited extent (Hövelmann and Südhoff 2023).

With the development of its new humanitarian strategy for 2024-2028, Berlin finds itself at a crossroads. On one hand, the strategy aims to define clearer priorities, focusing on fewer focal points compared to the previous strategy, due to the country's limited capacities. On the other hand, Berlin seems only partially willing to relinquish its ambition to comprehensively cover all topics as a top donor. Given its limited staff capacities compared to the EC and **the UK** (see Table 1), this has **implications for its ambition to be influential not only as a payer but also as a player.** Achievements such as the highly strategic and well-respected German agenda-setting in the area of anticipatory action are the exception rather than the rule. While **Germany** is recognised as a moderator in international processes and a bridge builder in forums such as the Council Working Party on Humanitarian Aid and Food Aid (COHAFA), a representative of a European donor echoes the sentiments of many: "Germany has not yet either the wideness or the depth. They cannot yet deal with all key topics, and they have not yet the depth to move some topics."

Thus far, Germany represents a hybrid position between other top donors on one hand and financially much smaller donors on the other. The latter prioritise depth and profile in a few topics instead of breadth. Colleagues from other donor countries appreciate that **medium-sized European donors**, in particular, are **focusing on specific topics** and systematically trying to advance them. Examples include **Norway** (e.g. gender/flexible funding), **Sweden** (flexible funding, fragile states), the Netherlands (mental health/localisation) and **Switzerland** (Nexus, international humanitarian law). These approaches by medium-sized donors are

**Mid-sized European donors adopt a focussed strategy to raise their profile – with success**

often successful in terms of their influence and profile. Numerous international experts attribute a disproportionately high level of influence to them in comparison to their financial commitment. In some cases, players such as **Sweden** or **Switzerland** are even considered more influential than the financial heavyweight **Germany**. In addition to aspects of tradition, long-standing knowledge and personnel management, there is also a dimension of soft power, alongside the always dominantly discussed hard power through financial resources. In the realm of soft power, actors such as **Sweden**, the **Netherlands** and the EC are considered to have expertise in areas such as wining & dining, networking and visibility, while other actors largely neglect this field (Hövelmann and Südhoff 2023).

Emerging actors such as **France** and **Spain** contribute to the diverse landscape among top European donors. While they are substantially **increasing their financial commitments**, they are **not accompanying this with adequate project and policy capacities**, as noted by several academic interviewees. Criticism has been directed at **France** for very self-confidently pushing positions while lacking the respective expertise, as highlighted by European diplomats in interviews. In the case of **Spain**, this resulted in a reticence that leaves its potential as a growing donor in the policy area untapped. **The UK**, once a leading humanitarian power, benefits from its reputation and expertise developed during the Department for International Development (DFID) era. However, it has **experienced a significant loss of personnel, influence and presence**, not only with the EU but also more broadly. "We have all lost a humanitarian leader", one academic complained, noting an overall lack of European thought leadership.

**"We have all lost a humanitarian leader"**

Moreover, according to participants, there are more than **a dozen states** within the EU alone that do not participate in humanitarian policy issues, even in formal forums like COHAFA. These states also **do not employ experts in this area** in their capitals. This illustrates the highly

Germany: Plenty of Funding, Limited Human Resources			
Humanitarian Assistance	Overall funding (rounded) in million euro 2020	Number of staff	Funding per staff (rounded) in million euro
Germany	2,137	76.5	27.9
Sweden	405.9	45	9.0
US	4,972	750	6.6
United Kingdom	1,762	150	11.7
EU Commission (DG ECHO)	1,823	600	3.0

Table 1: Comparison of humanitarian funds to be allocated per employee in humanitarian units of leading donors in 2020  
Source: German Bundestag 2020

diversified strategic approaches among EU member states and the challenge of coordinating them.

### Structural approaches of European humanitarian donors

The European strategic landscape becomes even more complex at the **structural level**, particularly regarding donor structures and local dynamics in crisis contexts and hubs in the Global South. Only two European donors maintain comprehensive local structures and presences, which also result in significantly different operational approaches in their roles as donors: **the UK** and the EC.

While British presence in local contexts has somewhat diminished recently, ECHO alone, with its over 400 staff members in Brussels (compared to Germany's 65 in Berlin), employs around 450 staff members in embassies on the ground. Among them, in addition to the majority of approximately 300 technical assistants in crisis countries, there are 40 technical experts in regional

hubs who possess expertise and local knowledge. This contributes both to on-site and international decision-making processes. Especially in informal settings and open discussions, this creates a crisis expertise among present donors, **"much helped by their missions abroad"**, according to a top donor representative. At the same time, **ECHO** leverages its local network for an **operational approach that relies significantly more on earmarked donations and on-site operational support**, bordering on "micromanagement", as lamented by an interviewed practitioner. This **sets ECHO apart in key reform debates**, for example, from European countries like **Sweden** and **Norway**, which have long advocated for more flexible donor financing.

**ECHO diverges from European countries in key reform debates**

Structurally, ECHO stands out within the EU with its local presence. Besides **the UK**, only **Switzerland** and **Norway** possess certain local structures and expertise,

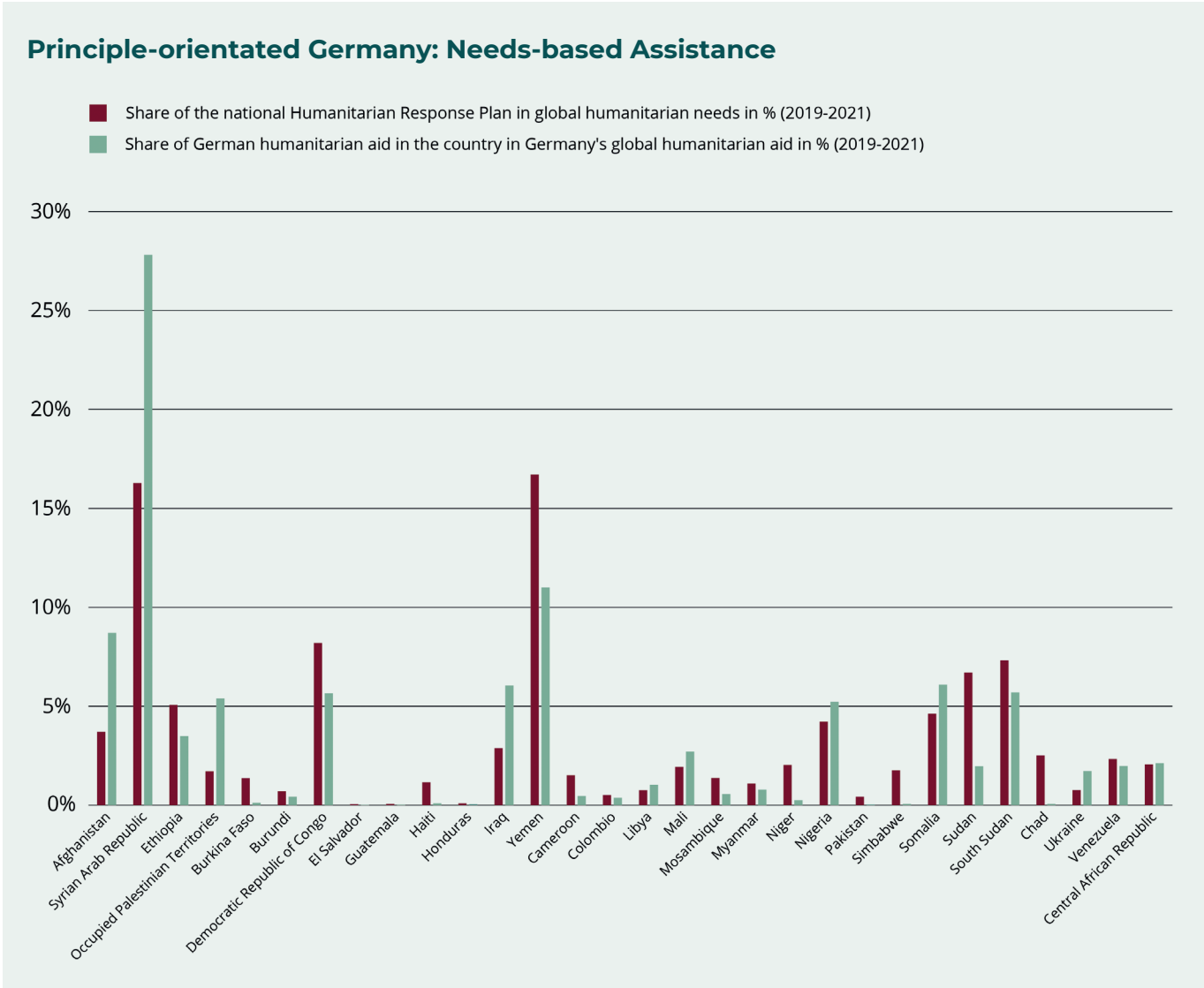


Figure 11: Share of humanitarian needs per crisis to global needs to the share of German humanitarian funding per crisis to total German humanitarian funding / Sources: GFFO 2022; FTS OCHA 2023; OCHA 2023a



though to a lesser extent. The highly centralised top donor, **Germany**, lacks any humanitarian experts in its embassies (outside of the UN hubs in Geneva and New York; German Bundestag 2023). Likewise, Germany's staff capacities are impacted by the continuous internal rotation of its largely non-specialised personnel (Hövelmann and Südhoff 2023).

### Principle-oriented approaches of European humanitarian donors

This issue of value and **principle orientation** versus interest-led humanitarian policy brings light to various intersections and conflicting stances among European states. **The EC, positioned at one end of the value orientation scale**, is perceived by civil society representatives and other donor governments as largely adhering to values and principles in allocating funds within the scope of ECHO, which primarily focuses on humanitarian needs. Similarly, **Germany** is seen as being principle-oriented, a perception supported by international partners and confirmed by CHA analyses of needs-oriented funding (see Figure 11).

Interviewees attributed similar profiles to most Scandinavian states and actors such as **Switzerland** and the **Netherlands**. This is supported by one of the few comparative analyses in this context. In the rather developmentally oriented 2023 Principled Aid Index, Nordic countries and the **Netherlands** performed particularly well, while Eastern European states ranked among the lowest (ODI 2023).

The group of like-minded, principle-oriented states face **several European actors** who either barely position themselves or **explicitly emphasise an interest-oriented approach** to their humanitarian aid and international cooperation. Examples include **the UK** since 2020 (Worley 2020), **France**, particularly in the context of its often-criticised policies in Francophone Africa, and **Hungary**, which directs its humanitarian action exclusively to the needs of Christians in crisis areas.<sup>4</sup>

In summary, **European actors** are often individually credited with **significant influence**. However, the extent to which the European **puzzle pieces collectively form a complementary whole** versus remain isolated and ineffective, **or even weaken each other due to contradictions**, raises the **central question of coordinating** European humanitarian policies, as well as its formats and impacts.

**ECHO is considered to be highly principle-orientated, Hungary intends to help Christians abroad only**

## 3. Coordination of European humanitarian policies – Forums and formats

Analysing coordination mechanisms among humanitarian actors is a complex task, involving the distinction of numerous thematic, geographic/regional, intra- and inter-institutional, informal, and formal levels, which naturally overlap and influence each other. Additionally, other dimensions of hard power and soft power elements and their combinations play a role in formal institutional forums and informal formats concerning the influence of actors, making analysis challenging. European coordination, viewed locally in a globalised humanitarian system, inevitably **takes place at a variety of regional levels**, including:

- **National and local crisis contexts**
- **Regional hubs**
- **(UN) hubs in the Global North**
- **Capitals of relevant donor governments**
- **Brussels as the seat of the EU and EC**

When discussing the coordination of European foreign policy, the focus is often on the level of the European capitals and the EC headquarters in Brussels, which will therefore be considered here as a first step:

### 3.1. Formal cooperation forums

At the European level, the most relevant formal EU forums for humanitarian issues accessible only to EU member states are the Council Working Party on Humanitarian Aid and Food Aid (COHAFA), a **bi-annual DG meeting** at director level of all EU member states (a kind of high-level COHAFA), and the **Humanitarian Aid Committee** (HAC, see Box p. 20). Additionally, there is the **Triangle Group**, consisting of three consecutive member states, each holding the six-month EU Council Presidency.

The best-known forum, COHAFA, meets usually ten times a year, typically in person in Brussels. It defines itself as the most important forum “for strategic and political debates” (European Commission 2024) on humanitarian action between the EU Member States and the EC. The explicit aim is to “enhance the consistency of relief efforts at both the EU and global levels” (European Commission 2024). However, there was a **consensus** among all donor representatives interviewed, including the EC, that **the forum only partially fulfils this task**, with differing assessments of the causes. Consensus also exists regarding the challenge posed by a very heterogeneous group of member states and participants, many of whom often play a minor role and have limited humanitarian expertise, juxtaposed with the active participation of no more than half a dozen members.

Moreover, discussions largely remain at the level of **informative coordination** (MacCarthaigh and Molenveld 2018, 658). Participants describe this as leading to a “briefing marathon” (one interviewee) with few tangible

#### **Benefits of COHAFA? “There aren’t even any meeting notes taken”**

results. “There aren’t even any meeting notes taken”, complains one European diplomat. The forum is valued in cases of acute crises, such as the attack on Ukraine in 2022, the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan in 2021, and the escalation of violence in Tigray in 2021, where it provides added value to participants as a forum for information exchange in chaotic crisis situations. However, all interviewed stakeholders lament that it is unsuitable for thematic coordination or for coordinating and tracking common strategic priorities.

Responsibility is partially attributed to the COHAFA secretariat and the rotating EU Council Presidency, which has led to a lack of leadership and coordination beyond logistical issues at the Brussels level. “At times, it is quite apparent that the ECHO colleagues view the COHAFA merely as a box-ticking exercise, where they have to brief the member states on their activities”, complained a donor representative during the interview. At the Brussels level, some mention a lack of coordination among the member states themselves, who do not make better use of the forum and do not ensure thematic and personnel continuity, as seen with Germany. “How do you ensure

a continued process and progress on the topics moved (...)”, asks an involved EU diplomat, “when shortly after no counterpart on the German side is anymore in place?”

The **Humanitarian Aid Committee** (HAC) is an annual forum of member states where the EC presents its planned funding for the coming fiscal year. However, beyond this briefing, **operational funding priorities or policy issues are not substantially discussed** in the group. According to participants, 2023 marked the first time a controversy arose, as some Eastern European countries advocated for a greater ECHO funding focus on Ukraine.

**In the HAC  
neither operational  
funding priorities nor  
policy issues are  
substantially  
discussed**

The **DG Meeting**, hosted by ECHO, includes all 27 member states but was not cited by any interviewed representative of an EU member state as a relevant forum. The same sentiment applies to the **Triangle Group**, where governments holding the EU Council Presidency every six months are expected to coordinate international cooperation, including humanitarian action. According to interviewees, this mechanism works to a limited extent when several interested and committed member states follow one another. However, its potential is limited when the baton is passed, as will be the case in the summer of 2024 from **Belgium** to **Hungary** and subsequently to **Poland**, **Denmark**, and **Cyprus**. NGO representatives also noted in the interview that, with respect to their work, the forum exists only on paper. They expressed that briefings and advocacy work always must be conducted bilaterally with all members, nonetheless.

### 3.2. Informal coordination forums

In addition to these formal bodies, leading European governments also coordinate in numerous **informal forums**. However, in the humanitarian field, these formal bodies are particularly crucial for coordination. Many interviewees consider them to be **quite effective** substitutes for insufficiently functioning formal bodies.

**Informal forums in particular are considered effective substitute structures**

Among the most important forums are bilateral consultations, as well as formats such as the **Group of Nordics**, the **E6**, the **Stockholm Group**, and initiatives for consultations between member states. At the international level, the relevance of **G7** working processes in the humanitarian field has also increased, according to government representatives.

The importance of bilateral consultations has also increased, with ECHO conducting them with numerous member states, and Germany now proactively hosting these.

The Group of Nordics follows a fixed format with regular internal consultations, convening once or twice a year. However, according to participants, the group's effectiveness is hindered by fluctuating interest, which often limits it to **informative coordination**, falling short of the expectations of humanitarian-profile members **Sweden** and **Norway**. The E6 Group, comprising six European states (**Sweden, Germany, Denmark, Norway, Switzerland, and the Netherlands**) and initiated by Germany and Sweden, aimed to pool the power of like-minded European partners in terms of both **content and strategy**.

However, following a change in leadership among the main initiators, the format floundered in recent years and was ultimately replaced by the **Stockholm Group**.

The Stockholm Group, initiated during a meeting in Stockholm in 2021, focuses on the largest donors and intentionally includes only **Germany, Sweden, the UK, ECHO, and the US** as fixed participants, while occasionally involving smaller donors

**The Stockholm Group is considered an effective forum bringing together influence and expertise**



For example, the first consultations between Germany and the Group of Nordics, representing all Scandinavian countries, took place in 2022 at Berlin's invitation. Similarly, German consultations are held with **Switzerland** and the **Netherlands**, as well as annual multi-day consultations with the largest donor country, the **US**. Participants suggest that the bilateral intra-European consultations serve as valuable platforms for both **informative** and **thematic** coordination (see Chapter 1). However, they are often ad hoc, lacking systematic and regular scheduling but are rather hosted "when somebody thinks, we really should talk to the Swiss again soon." Moreover, a former participant notes that these consultations are too dependent "from people and their personal engagement."

in specific discussions. Considered a relatively effective forum, the Stockholm Group leverages the **influence and expertise** of its **leading** members to drive forward topics. The group meets approximately once a year at the department head level, enabling an effective follow-up process in the respective capitals. Additionally, it convenes irregularly at the management/deputy level online and in hybrid formats. Participants note that the **personal bonds** foster trusting cooperation and significant **agility**. For instance, according to a member, even on the second Christmas Day 2022, a meeting was possible online at short notice in response to the ban on women's work in Afghanistan (which aimed to exclude women's participation in aid organizations in the future and provoked significant criticism, including from donors).

*Illustration: Formal and informal humanitarian coordination forums in Europe (dark blue) and internationally (light blue) and their relative importance (non-systematic interview analysis)*

"In the Stockholm Group, only those genuinely interested are seated at the table, bringing forward issues of great urgency and truly wanting to drive these forward", describes a government representative, highlighting the advantages of this 'Coalition of the Willing'. "The level of collaboration enables an impact both upwards towards the leadership level and downwards to the operational level within domestic institutions", notes another government representative, provided that the results are adequately communicated, a point sometimes criticised at lower working levels. Examples of jointly addressed issues include the decree on women in Afghanistan, accountability issues such as the much-discussed food

diversion allegations against the World Food Programme (WFP) in Ethiopia in 2023, the international review process on dealing with Internally Displaced People (IDP), as well as **coordination in acute and complex crisis situations** such as Palestine, Ukraine, and Afghanistan at a high working level, according to participants.

According to some participants, **the Stockholm Group fills a gap**, at least for a small group, that Brussels has not yet been able to fill at a formal level. At the same time, it is evident how strongly **almost all informal forums are influenced by** personal ties and interests and not necessarily very sustainable frameworks.

## Glossary

### Relevant Forums of European Humanitarian Coordination

#### Formal Forums

##### COHAFA / DG Meeting

The Council Working Party on Humanitarian Aid and Food Aid (COHAFA) is the primary forum for humanitarian aid among all EU member states as well as the European Commission, convening approximately ten times a year in Brussels. The Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (ECHO) and EU member states exchange information on humanitarian crises and assess humanitarian needs. The aim is to enhance the coherence of aid efforts both at the EU and global levels. The COHAFA meeting takes place twice annually as **DG meeting** at the director level and is hosted by the current presidency within a meeting of the Directorate-General of all 27 member states.

##### Humanitarian Aid Committee (HAC)

The Humanitarian Aid Committee (HAC) is operated by the European Commission and was established in 1995, bringing together the former Relief and Rehabilitation Commission (RRC) and Commission of Voluntary Agencies Commission (COVA). It was formalised by Council Regulation (EC) No. 1257/96 of June 20, which also outlined the objectives of European humanitarian aid in broad terms. In practice, the committee meets once a

year with all EU member states when the European Commission presents its plans for allocating humanitarian funds in a particular budget year.

##### Triangle Group

The Triangle Group comprises three states that take turns holding the presidency of the European Council in consecutive 6-month periods. The presidency rotates among EU member states, with each country alternately leading the council and preparing a 6-month work program. The presidency also chairs bodies such as COHAFA. The member states holding the presidency work together in trios, known as the "Triangle Group". The group aims to set long-term goals and develop a common agenda to be addressed by the group during its joint 18-month term. Hungary and then Poland will follow Belgium's current presidency in July 2024 and early 2025, respectively.

#### Informal European Forums

##### The Stockholm Group

The Stockholm Group emerged from a retreat hosted by Sweden in October 2021 in Stockholm. Participants included the three largest humanitarian aid donors (USA, Germany, and EU) and the three largest OCHA donors, including pooled funds (Germany, Sweden,

and the United Kingdom). The group has since continued to meet on the sidelines of other meetings (EHF/ World Bank/IMF Spring Meetings) as well as virtually. Presently, it typically convenes once a year at the director level and ad hoc at the deputy director level to discuss humanitarian issues informally and confidentially.

##### E6 Group

The E6 Group of six European states (Sweden, Germany, Denmark, Norway, Switzerland, Netherlands) was initiated by Germany and Sweden, among others, to pool the efforts of like-minded European partners. The objective was to connect limited policy capacities and complement Germany's financial weight with traditional European donors possessing extensive expertise and similar policy positions.

##### Group of Nordics

The group is a coalition of Scandinavian states (Sweden, Denmark, Norway, Finland, Iceland) that engage in regular consultations on humanitarian policies.

### 3.3. Regional levels of coordination

#### Humanitarian Hub Brussels?

##### Brussels is still not a recognised hub for humanitarian stakeholders

Compared to hubs like New York and Geneva, Brussels has yet to establish itself as a recognised hub for humanitarian stakeholders, debates, and policy developments. Despite recent efforts with the creation of the EHF and other events, Brussels has only been moderately successful in positioning itself as a central forum and melting pot for European humanitarian policies, let alone as a global forum.

Comparing the presence of relevant stakeholders in key European capitals reveals that **Brussels is just one player among the fragmented locations**. It **falls behind** in various aspects, such as the presence of humanitarian staff in local embassies compared to the UN hub in Geneva and the lack of humanitarian think tanks and academic institutions (see Figure 12). “There is no appetite in humanitarian issues in the think tank or policy arena in Brussels”, criticises a Brussels-based academic. While Brussels is similar to Berlin or London in terms of the quantitative office presence of UN organisations and international NGOs (INGO), most actors in

Brussels operate only lobby and fundraising offices, with few headquarters or European offices with policy departments of UN organisations or INGOs located there.

This deficit is particularly relevant concerning the coordination of government policies at the level of European embassies, as hardly any embassy in Brussels employs humanitarian personnel. “The exchange on humanitarian policy always takes place with the capitals”, says a Brussels-based diplomat. Similarly, representatives from civil society face significant challenges in Brussels compared to locations like Geneva and New York. “Key counterparts for donor exchanges are always the capital representatives”, says a representative from a Brussels-based NGO.

##### Barely any European embassy employs humanitarian staff in Brussels

Especially among European member states, this situation **hampers the development** of a network that could facilitate constant presence and day-to-day exchange, **fostering** informal coordination and harmonisation. Such a **network** could not only leverage the significant financial hard power of European actors but also build

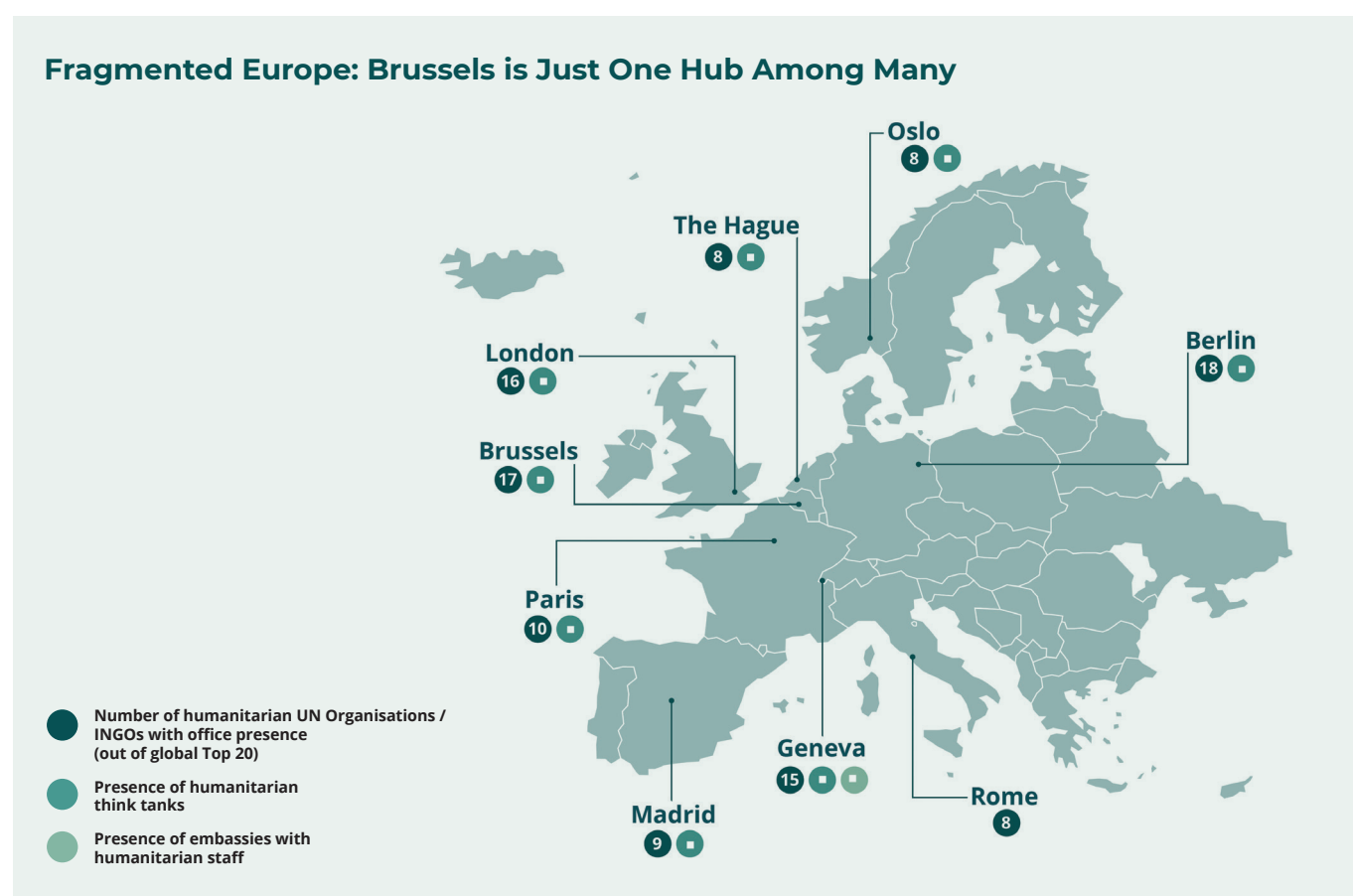


Figure 12: Presence of humanitarian actors in selected European centres

Sources: Interviews & websites of the Top 20 humanitarian UN agencies and INGOs (measured by funding) and humanitarian Think Tank websites



effective soft power. However, the monthly COHAFA meetings, attended by participants mainly from EU capitals, already impose a logistical burden. As one ex-participant admits, “Due to the face-to-face meetings and journey, a COHAFA meeting actually costs two working days every month.” This dynamic can lead to a tendency to limit exchanges to purely formal and necessary discussions. Consequently, there is also a lack of active informal forums in Brussels compared to New York, where around 150 informal Groups of Friends alone moderate a wide range of humanitarian issues.

In conclusion, the exchange among stakeholders in Brussels largely remains at the **informative coordination level**, and even this often occurs in a decentralised manner, involving Brussels, other capitals, and online platforms.

### National and regional coordination levels

Nowadays, relevant humanitarian policy and programme issues are increasingly discussed and decided at the national level and in hubs in crisis regions rather than in the capitals of the Global North. However, the fragmented European presence and coordination is also reflected at the local and regional level in crisis regions meaning that **much potential for joint approaches and progress is unrealised at this level**, according to many interviewees.

As described, European actors have a significant presence in crisis contexts in purely quantitative terms through the ECHO network, which includes five regional hubs in Amman, Dakar, Bangkok, Nairobi and Panama, as well as around 400 technical assistants and experts in crisis countries. Their expertise is valued by other actors. Among the top donors, only the USA has a similar structure. However, the absence of humanitarian counterparts from other top European donors such as Germany, France or Sweden **hinders the coordination of policies**, even at the regional hubs, let alone in some fragile crisis countries like Yemen. Despite Yemen being one of the world’s worst humanitarian crises for many years, hardly any European donor is present, even though the security situation has improved. This situation leads to Europeans wasting their influence in the humanitarian sector, as one UN representative complains: “If you want to influence the Houthis, you have to sit at the table and not in a distanced capital”, echoing the criticism of many.

At the same time, European countries hardly utilise ECHO’s capacities and networks for knowledge exchange and coordination, according to complaints from diplomats from ECHO and member states. In particular, the technical experts who cover more thematic areas at a single hub like Amman, and have more staff compared to most of the top European donors in the capital, are seen by European diplomats as an untapped potential for the exchange of expertise, coordination and joint

policy impact at the **thematic coordination level**. One European diplomat believes, for example, that it would be very promising “to bring the Technical Experts in the Hubs with German counterparts together” to discuss common challenges and reactions. Cooperation between these two top donors would offer opportunities for similar donors such as Sweden or the Netherlands, which also work in a very centralised manner.

Additionally, there is a lack of a concrete **policy process and insufficient information flow from the European capitals to the hubs**. This exchange would enable European actors on the ground to effectively introduce positions discussed in smaller formats to the relevant forums in hubs and local crisis regions. Such an exchange could stimulate informal forums and provide input to the UN-coordinated **Humanitarian Country Teams**. It could also prove effective in questions relating to the organisation of relevant local institutions and committees in which the donors themselves do not participate, but whose work is of central importance (interview with a local donor representative). For instance, if the controversial cluster system for operational coordination or the UN’s country-based pooled funds, as an increasingly important financing instrument, continue to neglect local participation and expertise, **only donors on the ground will be able to follow up and consistently push for them**. At the same time, they will only prevail if they are not dismissed as individual opinions.

Due to these limitations, **achieving even an informative coordination level is only partially successful** at the regional level of national and regional hubs. Only occasionally and in small groups of specialised colleagues can a **thematic coordination level** be achieved, for example, between three to four European donor representatives in Amman on topics like Protection and Gender (interviews with donor representatives).

## 4. Successes and structural obstacles of the forums and levels of European coordination

The shared forums and formats for the coordination of humanitarian policy among European government actors provide a mixed picture regarding which coordination forums are successful in which dimension, and where gaps exist. Despite the diversity, this chapter

will attempt to identify success factors that can be generalised (Chapter 4.1.) as well as the current structural obstacles to further coordination successes (Chapter 4.2.).

### 4.1. Success factors for effective coordination

Formal European coordination forums, such as COHAFA, the Humanitarian Donor Group and the DG meeting of all 27 member states, play a relevant role at the **informative coordination level** or levels 1+2 (Communication/ Consultation) according to MacCarthaigh and Molenveld (see Chapter 1). This is particularly true regarding COHAFA in humanitarian day-to-day business, but also and especially in the event of unexpected ad hoc crises with a great need for exchange on acute, unclear crisis situations. However, at the level of **thematic coordination**, the formal forums **only play a marginal** role. Furthermore, at the level of **strategic coordination**, in the sense of medium and long-term objectives and prioritisation of agendas and reform topics, they play **no role**. Their **core advantages** lie in their great **inclusivity**, the **range** of topics, **low-threshold** offers for stakeholders with limited expertise and capacities, as well as a **certain structure** due to a fixed routine and logistics that enable coordination work independent of individuals.

**Informal cooperation formats** between European actors, such as the E6 Group, the Group of Nordics and bilateral exchange formats, for example between ECHO and member states, and increasingly promoted by Germany, are also **very effective at the level of informative coordination**. At this level, they have made a leap in quality, especially since the COVID-19 pandemic, as the new digital communication options have enabled

**Even informal coordination forums rarely achieve sustainable results in terms of content**

they **rarely** achieve **sustainable results** at the **level of thematic coordination**, let alone the **strategic level** of joint effective prioritisation.

far more frequent and low-threshold coordination formats to date, as confirmed by a senior donor representative. At the thematic coordination level, however,

#### Role model Cash?

The reform example of **cash assistance**, discussed in numerous interviews, was an instructive exception in the past. The use of cash programmes versus in-kind contributions was still one of the **most controversial programme debates** in humanitarian aid in the 2010s. On the one hand, it took time for pioneers and advocates such as ECHO and the **UK** to convince other donors in Europe and the **US** of the advantages of flexible cash programmes. There was also initially great resistance from large UN organisations to the preservation of traditional programmes and mandates (Bastagli, Hagen-Zanker, and Sturge 2016). In 2018, the WFP and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) jointly hosted a one-week donor mission to Lebanon and Jordan to overcome conflicting interests among the top donors as well as competition between the two organisations.

Looking back, however, involved parties state that the subsequent **joint pressure from London, Brussels, and later Berlin** and other capitals to rely on cash programmes whenever possible, not only in the Middle East but worldwide, was so **successful in driving forward** change management and a **reform agenda** that even the largest aid organisations could not escape it. "Large organisations like ours need the pressure from donors for issues of fundamental change", says a UN representative involved at the time. Despite ongoing competition between aid organisations in the field of cash coordination, to which the Grand Bargain 2021 had to dedicate its own political **caucus**, the share of cash programmes in global humanitarian aid subsequently doubled from 10 per cent (2016) to 21 per cent within a few years (HPG/ODI 2019, CALP Network 2023), and the value of cash aid as a modern modality for humanitarian aid in crises with functioning markets is now widely recognised. For experts, **cash is thus one of the few recent success stories of humanitarian reform** that has been achieved through strategic, coordinated agenda-setting by top European donors (especially the UK, ECHO) (see also ODI/HPG Project 2023).

Overall, however, European diplomats criticise the fact that relevant communication gaps remain in the informal forums of infrequent bilateral consultations and smaller groups. This can also be illustrated by the example of a Nordic country that revised its humanitarian strategy in 2023 but had no knowledge of the parallel process taking place on the German side.

### The Stockholm Group: a pioneer

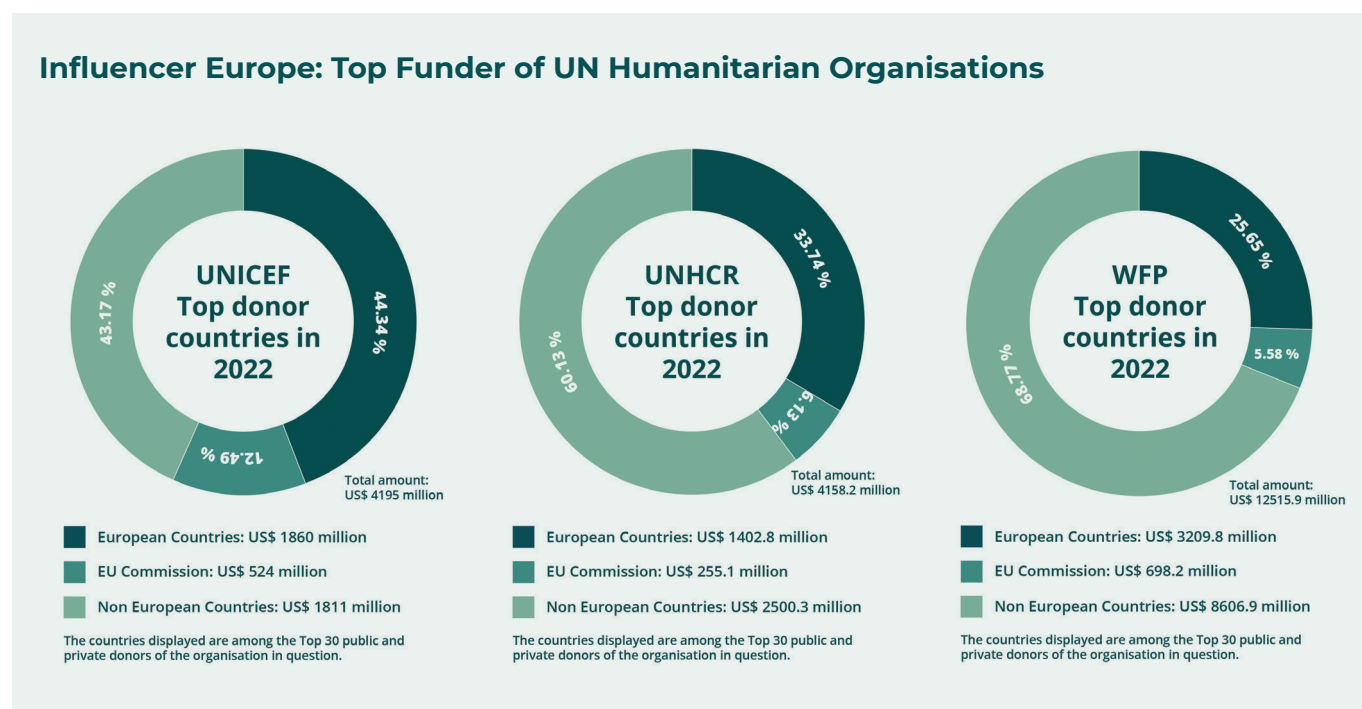
At the level of informal forums discussed here, the Stockholm Group has been successful in various dimensions, making a substantial contribution among leading European donors plus the US. This success is evident both at the **informative coordination level and partly at the thematic coordination level**, especially when these topics are time-sensitive or affect common interests. However, even within this top-level, small, elite circle, **strategic coordination is only partially recognisable**. This limitation is illustrated by the example of the current donor priority of accountability:

One of the most prominent examples mentioned in numerous interviews of an accountability problem, also addressed in a coordinated manner by the Stockholm Group, was the very relevant food diversion issue in 2023 in the context of WFP Ethiopia and the crisis in Tigray. After WFP “downplayed the issue” (according to a European diplomat) for a long time, the most important **donor states from Europe, in agreement with the US**, succeeded in clarifying and **remedying the grievances** through a joint position, frozen funding, a joint

letter, etc. (interviews with donor representatives). In the case of UNRWA (United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East), almost all relevant European donors also uniformly suspended their payments temporarily due to the allegations in January 2024 that UNRWA employees were involved in the massacres of 7 October 2023 during the attack on Israel (Kuntschner 2024).

At the same time, the central field of accountability<sup>5</sup> within UN organisations, which receive around 70 per cent of humanitarian aid worldwide (FTS 2024), can illustrate major challenges in coordination among European and international donors beyond successful individual examples. On the one hand, European countries are prominently represented in the supervisory bodies of major UN humanitarian organisations such as WFP, UNHCR and UNICEF, and they are crucial sources of funding for these leading humanitarian organisations, which should give them significant influence (see Figures 13, 14, 15). On the other hand, the positioning and prioritisation among European donors, or even within donor institutions, is sometimes controversial or unclear. “We are now sitting in all these fora, but it is not clear what exactly we want to achieve there”, complains the representative of a top European donor. “It is so obvious that fragmented donor structures allow organisations to get away with major issues”, says a European diplomat.

**“It is so obvious that fragmented donor structures allow organisations to get away with major issues”**



Figures 13, 14, 15: Share of European funding in the budgets of the largest UN humanitarian organisations in % (2022)

Sources: UNICEF Annual Report 2022; the countries displayed are among the Top 30 public and private donors of the organisation in question; UNHCR Donor Ranking; the countries accumulated are the Top 30 public and private donors of the organisations in question; Contributions to WFP in 2022; the countries displayed are among the Top 30 public and private donors of the organisation in question.



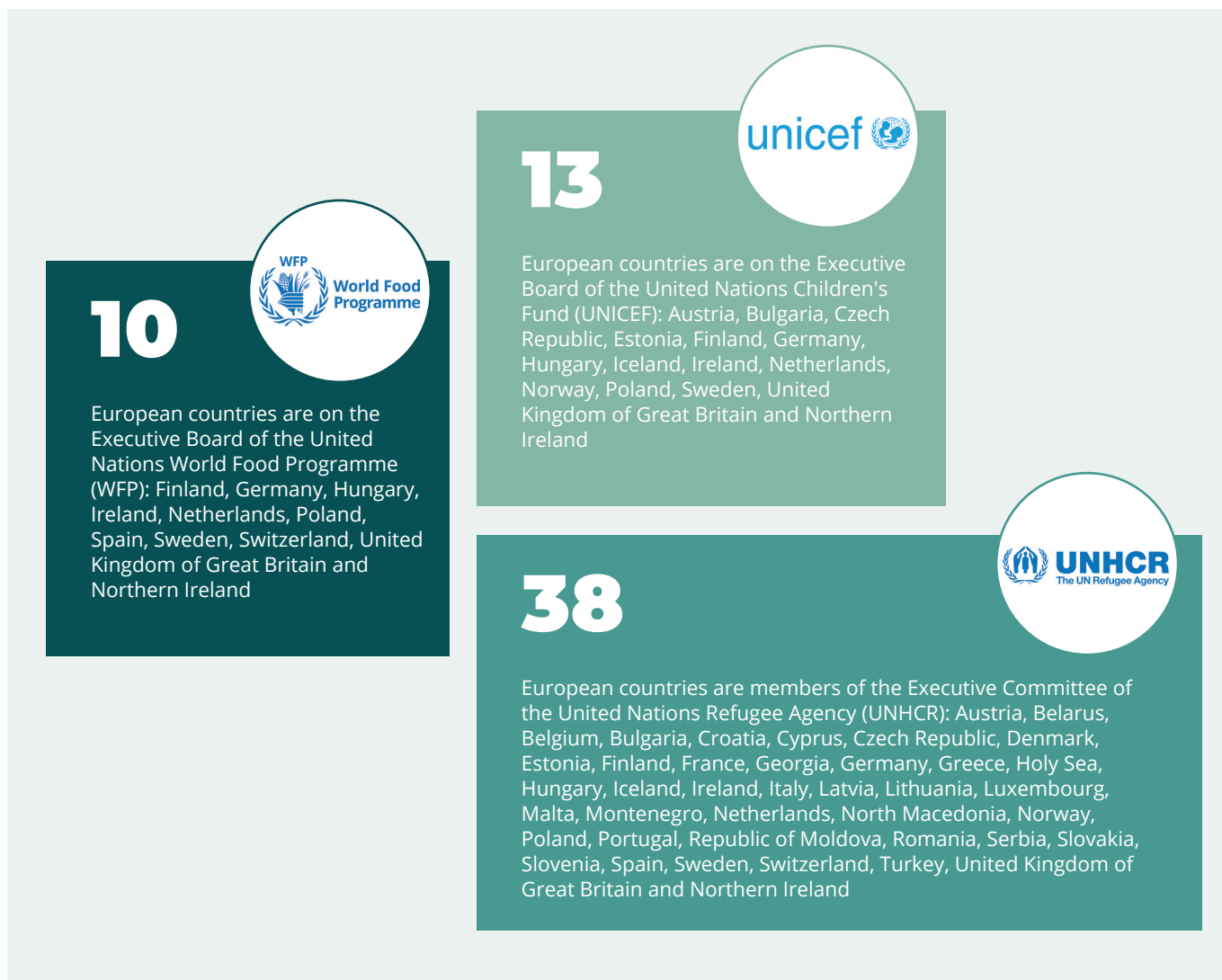


Figure 16: Number of European countries in the executive boards of UN organisations

Furthermore, the EC can only play a limited coordinating role. As it does not represent a nation-state, it only participates in UN boards as a guest and is typically only permitted to speak as the final actor in all debates. This arrangement sometimes “significantly weakens” its potentially representative role of European positions, as one European diplomat admits.

**Internal institutional conflicts** between EC directorates or government ministries can also lead to **contradictory positions within a donor actor**. This can occur, for example, on key issues such as the division of tasks and mandates in the field of humanitarian and development policy, to avoid duplication and inefficient silos. Such conflicts create **opportunities** on the UN side, as well as with large INGOs, to disregard expectations and **play actors against each other**, particularly when there is already a lack of internal coordination among relevant donors.

The described problem of a lack of presence and coordination in the crisis contexts on the ground also results in a deficiency of operational insight and expertise among

government employees. These employees are responsible for overseeing and financing the operational work of aid organisations, which often excel at self-promotion. “If donors have no way of filtering the intel they get from agencies, they are easy to confuse and easy to convince”, says a UN representative.

The challenge of a lack of presence of European actors in local contexts is also reflected in the sometimes-**limited presence** and correspondingly limited coordination of **European donors at hubs and headquarters of large aid organisations**, including the largest humanitarian organisation, WFP. The consequences of this in terms of **a lack of coordination, internal intelligence and soft power** can be illustrated with respect to the so-called “Rome-based agencies” (WFP, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD)) as an example (see p. 26).

Even the most effective informal forums, like the Stockholm Group, are therefore less effective in addressing prioritised accountability and efficiency issues in

## UN accountability and lack of European coordination - the example of the UN food organisations in Rome

„Food security is since the Ukraine war even a geopolitical issue, it would be very helpful if the EU would better coordinate on this“, commented a European diplomat in Rome. Despite the significant challenges in terms of accountability, efficiency and prioritisation that WFP, in particular is facing due to budget cuts at its headquarters in Rome, one diplomat says: „There is hardly any exchange in Rome and very little coordination among EU members. **We could aim at a very complimentary approach here, but we don't get this coordinated.**“

Rome is home to the Rome-based UN agencies, including the FAO, IFAD and WFP, which is the largest humanitarian organization in the world with an annual budget of \$14.2 billion in 2022. Organisations such as WFP are controlled by the governments of the donor countries, which sit on the Executive Board on a rotating basis, as well as by the permanent representations of the donor countries in Rome. The WFP Board of Directors comprises 36 members, including both donor and host governments of crisis regions, with 11 European actors incl. EC funding over 30 per cent of the WFP budget (see Figure 15).

WFP's challenges are mirroring key humanitarian issues discussed in this paper, with one European diplomat identifying at least **four major issues** WFP needs to address:

- WFP's dual mandate and its interpretation
- Efficiency issues and a refocus on the best skills
- Principled humanitarian aid in authoritarian contexts
- Broadening WFP's donor base

The current pressure to act can also be illustrated by the example of WFP, especially financially: Already in 2023, the WFP budget had to be reduced by more than a third, from \$14.2 billion to around \$ 8.5 billion. The crucial role played by European donors in such a process is explicitly stated by one diplomat: „What we fund, is WFP heading to – and vice versa.“

The importance of monitoring accountability and strategic alignment is under-

lined by another diplomat regarding the recent discussions on food diversions in Ethiopia and Somalia, as well as the upcoming realignment of the WFP's „Resilience Policy“, which is highly relevant to the mandate. However, the challenges for a coordinated European approach to the UN organisations in Rome are immense: „Only 3 to 4 donors can engage in a role as supervisors of WFP“, complains one diplomat. On the European side, the diplomat sees only **Germany, Sweden, Great Britain and the Netherlands** as active members. For instance, the Permanent Representation of the EU holds a 1/4 position to manage WFP issues, and the exchange even among the active states is „rather ad hoc and at other events' sidelines“, admits a diplomat who sees, **at best, an informative level of coordination achieved.**

The role of the EU representation primarily centres around a monthly „Heads of Mission“ meeting, although this meeting's effectiveness is hindered by unclear internal mandates and tasks. Officially, the EU's mandate only covers the Common European Agricultural Policy, so topics related to FAO/IFAD dominate discussions, with WFP matters only informally addressed. While the meeting is considered valuable for informing smaller EU states with fewer staff and expertise, it is deemed **irrelevant for achieving thematic and strategic coordination objectives.** Member states like **Sweden** at the same time oppose granting the EU representation a more substantial coordination role, citing fundamental European policy reasons. Additionally, the EU is represented as a guest on the WFP board, further limiting its influence in this context.

The **challenge of internal competition** is also illustrated by WFP top donor **Germany** and its divided responsibilities for humanitarian issues (German Federal Foreign Office - GFFO), development cooperation (Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development - BMZ) and agricultural policy (Federal Ministry of Food and Agriculture - BMEL). In addition to friction and resource losses due to internal competition, this also weakens Germany's, and thus a uniform European, positioning. For instance, this

division creates challenges when aligning on WFP's mandate, particularly regarding a stronger development policy orientation (BMZ) versus a narrowly defined humanitarian mandate (GFFO). In light of the decreasing WFP budget, this is a crucial question for its prioritization and strategic orientation and thus European coordination, but: „It is very difficult for example to coordinate with the Germans due to the ongoing BMZ & GFFO conflict,“ criticises a European diplomat.

At the same time, achieving an at least informative European coordination is challenging at the regional coordination level. Many states manage their relationships with the Rome-based organisations from their capitals and host Executive Board meetings (EB) with delegations from the capital. These delegations often only briefly inform themselves online about their statements on the day before the EB. Informal coordination forums, such as the thematic Group of Friends, which are very active in New York and elsewhere, also face **spatial fragmentation** in Rome. These forums exist on a limited scale in Rome and often struggle to integrate members from numerous cities. Consequently, there is **no Roman network** and **no soft power** of wining and dining. This, combined with the local shortage of personnel, results in „no internal intelligence“ about the local UN organisations.

The identified deficits in operational and strategic accountability are slated for structural improvements. Discussions are underway regarding a WFP governance reform aimed at rendering the WFP Board much more strategic and policy-oriented. However, these improvements will only materialise if the **structural deficits in donor coordination** are also addressed, and a **more thematic and strategic level of coordination** is achieved, in light of a strong US presence in Rome especially on the European side. The coordinating role of European actors in Rome „should be expanded, there is untapped potential in terms of coordination and diplomatic intelligence“, a Rome-based diplomat demands. A top donor representative succinctly sums up the challenge: „We deal with the whole range of WFP issues, but we influence none of it.“

strategic, long-term reform projects. They primarily focus on short-term reactions to acute developments, as evidenced by their effective but ad hoc handling of issues like food diversion and UNRWA.

Meanwhile, **significant strategic questions** loom over **accountability, mandates and coordination issues of UN aid organisations**. There are calls for major actors to refocus on narrowly defined humanitarian mandates and needs, as well as for a more sensible division of tasks and self-restriction, especially among large aid organisations (Slim 2022). These challenges coincide with organisational and strategic weaknesses in the coordination of the humanitarian system, particularly regarding the future role of OCHA. Additionally, there are concerns about multiple, poorly networked reform initiatives such as OCHA's Flagship Initiative or the Grand Bargain, the continuation of which as GB 3.0 faced resistance from the UN (interview with an NGO representative). Overcoming these challenges has been difficult, with resistance from some of the largest aid organisations from the UN and INGO world as profiteers of the status quo. A government representative from the Stockholm Group admits: "It is not yet clear in which direction we could move these accountability topics."

#### Factors for the success of informal coordination formats

Nevertheless, it is important to note that Informal coordination formats, such as the Stockholm Group, often achieve higher levels of coordination, including thematic coordination, compared to less effective formal forums. **Informal coordination formats offer several advantages** for European actors, including greater **agility**, the ability to focus on **a small number of topics** of common

relevance and the expertise, flexibility and financial **hard power** that result from **coordinating a small number of leading humanitarian actors**.

Accordingly, one participant identified the following **factors for the success** of the Stockholm Group:

- **A small circle**
- **Common interests**
- **Acute topics with great urgency**
- **The lack of an alternative forum**

The **disadvantages** of the **informal formats** include their **non-binding nature, dependence on personal interests** and ties and **lack of structure** and systematisation. These factors can lead to volatility and **limited sustainability** of the formats. Consequently, the effectiveness of all existing formal and informal forums and mechanisms is limited, as explained earlier. This raises questions about the **causes of the analysed coordination deficits at the thematic level and, in particular, at the strategic level**.

## 4.2 Structural causes of coordination deficits among European humanitarian actors

When discussing a lack of coordination, common buzzwords often emerge in everyday conversations and political analyses, some of which have already been addressed in this paper. These include a **lack of time**, a **lack of transparency**, the **importance of personal relationships** and a **lack of mindset**, all of which are also relevant in the humanitarian context as well. At the same time, it would be superficial and naïve to reduce the lack of coordination to merely a lack of commitment or time. Therefore, **conflicts over objectives and structural causes of a lack of European cooperation** will also be identified to outline realistic options for action.

"There are significant strategic reasons not to cooperate", admits a former official of a top donor. The literature also cites some strategic motives for humanitarian actors *not* to coordinate, because "there are numerous disincentives to coordination (...) such as the time it takes for

coordination structures to achieve their goals; the desire of individual stakeholders to retain autonomy (...) concerns over public exposure; an unwillingness to share critical information" (HERE-Geneva 2021, 5). The **humanitarian aid system** also **rewards actors for prioritising benefits for their own organisation** over common good objectives (GELI and CHA 2023).

Donor representatives suggest that humanitarian aid is inherently linked to the visibility and national influence of actors, particularly in making concrete decisions on financial issues. This raises several questions: Does the focus of medium-sized European donors on special topics like gender, mental health or flexible funding always result in a meaningful complementary approach? Or does the sum of the puzzle pieces sometimes fail to

create a cohesive strategy? Additionally, how does **the desire for national profiling stand in the way of an effective identification** of one or two common priority topics?

The need and desire for more systematic coordination of European policies can also diminish with the size of a donor, as it is easier for top donors to find channels and an audience for their concerns when needed.

### **All European humanitarian coordination formats are voluntary**

"Larger donor states always find their way to each other", states one European diplomat. Another factor influencing the willingness to invest further resources in systematic coordination is a donor's reform ambitions and

the extent to which it considers fundamental reforms of the humanitarian system to be necessary. Lower ambitions can correlate with lower coordination efforts, and vice versa. Here, as well as in principle, a fundamental **problem** is that **all European humanitarian coordination formats are voluntary**, the results are non-binding and there is no obligation to reach consensus or compromise due to the lack of binding resolutions.

This highlights the need to clarify the **requirements for European coordination** among relevant stakeholders, on a spectrum **between exchange and agenda-setting**, between **information and implementation**. For example, a single government representative responded to the criticism of many stakeholders regarding a lack of effective coordination by stating that if central reform projects were not implemented nationally, this would be "not a matter of coordination, but of implementation". Whether effective coordination presupposes the subsequent implementation of decisions is denied from this perspective. From an academic perspective, however, these are two sides of the same coin (MacCarthaigh and Molenveld 2018).

Moreover, the question arises as to whether **selective, thematic coordination issues** are possibly being pursued in part, while **strategic coordination** has lacked space and actors. This may result in European aid suffering from the symptom that "current humanitarian coordination does not see the forest, but focuses on the individual trees, down to their specific branches and leaves" (HERE-Geneva 2021, 7).

"Humanitarian aid is always also a part of foreign policy, let's not kid ourselves", says another government representative, who also highlights the **diversity of foreign policy interests and their effects** on diverse humanitarian aid, particularly in **questions of funding and humanitarian diplomacy**. The latter, by its very nature, operates in the realm of foreign policy diplomacy and often involves interest-driven priorities. Examples include Europe's Syria policy vis-à-vis a resurgent Assad regime, divergent relations with states like Saudi Arabia in the

Yemen conflict and France's defence policy and strategic interests in West African countries, among others. **France's** West Africa policy, for instance, directly impacts the room for manoeuvre of humanitarian actors in the region (Steinke 2021). Similarly, the current escalation of the Middle East conflict in Palestine poses substantial obstacles to a coherent European humanitarian policy that no coordination forum, however effective, could resolve.

**Example Middle East:** Regardless of one's perspective on the conflict, it seems indisputable that European actors have lost considerable credibility in the region due to contradictory statements and public positioning regarding, among other things, Israeli warfare and the demand for a permanent ceasefire (Stöckl, Pascale and Dahm 2023; Benner 2024). "Europe is at its low in its role in this conflict", criticised a UN representative from the region. A local diplomat from a country not actively involved in the war echoed this sentiment, stating, "European coordination is slow and not effective." He criticises, "You can see the cracks in the European coordination", pointing to a lack of unified support for creating human-

### **"Europe is at its low in its role in this conflict"**

itarian space and achieving a lasting ceasefire due to conflicting positions in the capitals of the EU heavyweights Paris and Berlin, among others. "If for example Germany is not taking sides in this

as major heavyweight, this weakens the whole European position." Interviewees in Cairo and Amman unanimously and clearly identified the challenge that Europe's ambivalent stance in the current Middle East conflict will shape the Global South's perspectives on the continent for many years to come. At the Munich Security Conference in February 2024, **Germany** was openly criticised for its perceived uncritical stance towards Israel, particularly by representatives of the so-called Global South (Braun and Bickel 2024), with whom the EU would also like to forge alliances through the Global Gateway Initiative, among other things. Berlin at the same time cites important historical and politically legitimate reasons that strongly influence the German diplomatic approach in this context and contribute to a contradictory European approach.

The current conflict in the Middle East is therefore only the most recent example of how political issues, a variety of **interests and historical responsibilities** can hinder a unified European stance and, consequently, European influence on humanitarian issues. **Improved coordination procedures would be of limited impact in this dynamic**. This dilemma also arises in other crisis contexts, considering Europe's regionally and contextually diverse colonial experiences and the current responsibilities of European states.

## Conflicting objectives of principle-based aid

Moreover, these interests can lead to a **conflict of objectives** between the preservation of principle- and needs-oriented, **neutral humanitarian aid and closer European coordination** of the actors, a concern also raised by civil aid organisations. Aside from ECHO and a few EU governments, they attest to the relative adherence to principles by a few European actors in the allocation of humanitarian funds and warn of the **tension between maintaining principles versus closer coordination**. Specific examples, such as the relatively disproportionate international funding of aid to Ukraine, also for security policy reasons, serve as a warning to advocates of significantly closer cooperation as a possible downside of the goal of achieving closer alignment on financial issues. Financial issues as a whole are cited as another hard power area in which hardly any member states wish to be influenced.

These challenges are intertwined with questions regarding the internal structural prerequisites for individual actors to pursue better international coordination. Actors may lack defined positions and priorities

**“If there is a complete lack of the baseline of functioning internal coordination, how can international coordination succeed?”**

due to **intra-institutional competition** or unclear overlapping mandates of departments, or simply due to a **lack of communication**, as numerous interviewees, for instance with regard to the internal

challenges of the two top donors, the EC and Germany complained. “If there is a complete lack of the baseline of functioning internal coordination, so how can international coordination succeed?” asks a European diplomat.

Overall, in the aggregation of formal and informal coordination forums, there remains, according to the assessment of the vast majority of interviewed European and international stakeholders in academia, practice, and on the governmental side, a substantial deficit in the field of thematic and particularly strategic cooperation. This deficit leads to a significant squandering of potential for European influence on humanitarian policies and urgent reform needs. „We don’t have a platform to say: Listen, this is really our joint ask as donors”, a European diplomat pointedly criticises.

Occasionally, a few interviewees consider these deficits to be less significant and refer, among other things, to international formats that should fulfil these tasks, such as the **OCHA Donor Support Group**, the **Good Humanitarian Donorship** group, and the **Grand Bargain**. Interviewees rightly point to a large plethora of forums, exchange formats, and appointments, especially with regard to formal international formats. However, according to the assessment of the vast majority of interviewees as well as previous analyses, these formats have their own limits and challenges (see p.30). Moreover, a reform dynamic can only emerge in these contexts if relevant donor governments bring in a significant joint political will and coordinated positions and priorities. This leads back to the challenge that effective **coordination of humanitarian policy by European actors is central, even when it comes to the effectiveness of coordination forums of a global format**.

In summary, the highlighted coordination obstacles, along with the longstanding discourse on an incoherent European foreign policy, raise the question of whether a more strategic European humanitarian coordination, which sets clear thematic priorities and effectively pursues them collectively, is actually a realistic goal. If so, what framework and steps could Europe take to embark on this path?



## The Limits of International Coordination Forums

Coordination has been a topic and challenge of humanitarian aid for decades. Despite efforts to address this issue through various forums, they have been encountering **structural and strategic limits** for many years.

Thus, as early as 2003 in Stockholm, the **Good Humanitarian Donorship (GHD)** group was founded with today 42 members. “24 Principles and Good Practice defined by the group provide both a framework to guide official humanitarian aid and a mechanism for encouraging greater donor accountability” (GHD 2023), which is the basic idea of the forum and has just been evaluated.

However, the yet unpublished result of the evaluation was sobering: **The GHD does not function effectively as a coordination forum** and is largely considered irrelevant to its intended tasks. Several member states, including leading donor states, are considering abolishing the GHD based on these results, while others still hope for a fundamental reform. Participants noted that the GHD pursues too many topics within too large a group and is seen as an ineffective talking club that partly duplicates the work of the Grand Bargain (see below).

Meanwhile, the **OCHA Donor Support Group (ODSG)**, with its current 30 members, serves as a sounding board for OCHA and consists largely of the largest OCHA donors. While it is an important discussion forum for OCHA's orientation, it has contributed **little to strengthening OCHA's role as a coordination forum** and actor for the international system. “The strength of OCHA lies in dealing with specific crises”, says an international scholar, but points out significant deficits in systematising OCHA's work overall, improving internal management, or better coordinating prominent initiatives like the **Flagship Initiative** (OCHA 2024). The new OCHA strategy (OCHA 2023), accompanied by the ODSG, is accordingly also regarded as “very vague” (Interviewee) and not very purposeful.

The **Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC)** is another coordination forum, focusing particularly on UN actors and consisting of 19 organisations and consortia “to develop policy, establish strategic priorities, and gather resources to address humanitarian crises” (IASC, n.d.). Twelve UN organisations are involved, “with a standing invitation to the International Committee of the Red

Cross, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies” (OCHA 2012). While the World Bank and NGOs via the International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA) network are always invited to participate, donor governments **play a role in the forum only in exceptional cases**.

Contrastingly, in the **Group of Seven (G7)**, which consists of seven leading international economies (**Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the United Kingdom, and the USA**), and the European Union, donor governments play a significant role. Established in 1975, the G7 initially focused on global economic and monetary issues but now extensively addresses questions of foreign and security policy relevance, including humanitarian issues. Many interviewees for this analysis noted that humanitarian issues have been prominent since the British G7 presidency in 2021. Germany subsequently used the G7 forum to strategically advance its priority humanitarian topic of anticipatory aid. However, **it remains uncertain whether this momentum continues**, given the dominance of defence policy and global economic challenges on the international agenda following the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the recent Japanese G7 presidency.

Meanwhile, the **Grand Bargain** will continue to work on humanitarian reforms until at least 2026. The Grand Bargain (GB) is an initiative emerging from the World Humanitarian Summit 2016, and “a unique agreement between some of the largest donors and humanitarian organisations who have committed to improving the effectiveness and efficiency of humanitarian action” (IASC, n.d.). The Grand Bargain is considered the **most inclusive forum for humanitarian policies**, as it encompasses both governments and INGOs, local NGOs, and UN organisations through its 67 signatories. It was also able to initiate **certain debates and pilot projects** from a broad spectrum of numerous workstreams until 2021, but it did not achieve widespread reform progress, particularly due to a lack of political support from leading actors, including donor governments in Europe (Metcalf-Hough et al. 2021; Südhoff and Milasiute 2021a). This was supposed to be addressed within the framework of GB 2.0 from 2021, focusing on a few topics in political caucuses, which were mainly successful in the field of operational coordination (Cash

Coordination) but very limited in politically sensitive issues like quality funding (Hövelmann 2022; Metcalf-Hough et al. 2021). Within the framework of **GB 3.0**, the Grand Bargain has again **set a broader agenda** with major cross-cutting themes like localisation, participation, anticipatory action, financing mechanisms, quality funding, and the Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus. The achievement of substantial progress in this ambitious framework will **depend heavily on a coordinated European effort**, especially given the significant influence of actors like the German government as member of the Facilitation Group of the Grand Bargain.

The mentioned international fora are complemented at the national level in crisis regions by the **Humanitarian Country Teams (HCT)** and by the more operational clusters for all relevant aid sectors introduced in the aftermath of the very uncoordinated humanitarian response to the tsunami disaster in Southeast Asia in 2004. While the clusters have made progress in operational coordination, they remain controversial due to criticisms of unclear roles and tasks and the lack of inclusion of local actors (HERE-Geneva 2021; Knox Clarke and Campbell 2018). HCTs, led by the local UN Humanitarian Coordinator, serve as forums for strategic and operational issues, in which all relevant aid organisations should participate. “The objective of this coordination is to ensure that the activities of these organisations are principled, timely, effective, efficient, and contribute to longer-term recovery” (Humanitarian Library n.d.). In some countries, donor governments also participate in the meetings, while in others, they do not, which among other things indicates “that the HCT role is unclear” and “many are not working well”, as analysed by an involved scholar. The role of the Humanitarian Coordinator is also an important topic in the context of the UN development system reform initiated by UN Secretary-General Guterres. Due to the perceived limitation of inclusivity and centralisation for regional cases, there are ongoing discussions about the need for significantly stronger **area-based coordination** as an alternative concept (Konydyk, Saez, and Rose 2020).

## 5. Summary and recommendations

The **need** for and the potential for more effective coordination of European humanitarian policies, **not only at an informative but also at a thematic and strategic level**, have been outlined and confirmed by numerous interviewees and in the reviewed literature. Similarly, significant practical and political obstacles hinder more intensive coordination. With its 27 EU member states plus three European top donor nations not part of the EU, **Europe constitutes the financially largest and most diverse donor community worldwide**. This highlights both the potential as well as the challenges of achieving a more coherent, coordinated humanitarian policy for European states.

A debate on overcoming the coordination problems is now inevitable, even for actors and governments that previously considered in-depth coordination of European policies only conditionally necessary or assessed the need for reform of the humanitarian system as less urgent than some of their counterparts. This shift is

**Call for fundamentally new prioritisation, division of labour, increased efficiency, and transparency**

driven by several factors, including dramatically growing funding gaps, shrinking budgets from leading donors, increasing needs, and forecasts of climate-induced humanitarian crises rising dramatically. There is also a call for **fundamentally new prioritisation, division of labour, increases in efficiency and transparency** and questioning of the tasks and mandates of central actors.

In these discussions, currently driven by significant momentum, there is now a broad consensus that the humanitarian system is not fit for purpose, enforced by further long lasting debates on localisation, decolonisation and accountability to affected populations, among other issues. European humanitarian actors are seen as central to driving reform. However, the issue extends **beyond the humanitarian system**; the **coordination of European actors themselves** is also **not fit for purpose** in achieving the self-imposed policy goals in the short or medium term.

In terms of coordination, as described, there are fundamental political and structural challenges that will not be overcome simply by investing a bit more time and personnel or by increasing communication in the short term. These are questions and reform issues that can only be addressed through sustainable thematic and long-term strategic coordination, especially among influential European actors. This is particularly crucial in light of the upcoming **elections in the USA** and current **developments in the US Congress**, such as the **deprioritisation of aid packages** even for a geostrategically

central crisis region like Ukraine due to domestic political wrangling (Wallisch 2024).

Options for action must also consider the outlined European obstacles, rather than just rhetorically questioning them, to be realistic rather than naive, feasible rather than illusory. Such options would need to navigate the following tensions:

- Ensuring the **genuine political interest** of all parties as a basic condition for successful coordination, **while** focusing on topics where **strong political interests** of national actors are not at play
- **The Dilemma: Coordination requires serious political interest – but cannot withstand overly strong political interests**
- **Recognising** that **financial decision-making processes** are difficult and **sensitive** to coordinate, but acknowledging that the corresponding **financial hard power** and the capacities of involved actors must be **a tool** to effectively enforce decisions
- **Acknowledging** that formal coordination forums are inclusive and have value in being purely informative, **while** recognising that informal forums may achieve greater depth of coordination, yet at the cost of being **exclusive** to a very small group of actors
- **Recognising the central importance of know-how** and presence in **crisis contexts** for profound decision-making and coordination processes, while noting that hardly any European **actor** except ECHO and with reservations 2-3 donor states **maintain such a presence in crisis regions**

Despite these dilemmas, are there still areas where **progress** currently seems **possible? When, if not now?** Politically, there seems to be a momentum that has not been this strong in many years, driven by the self-interest of the actors due to financial issues and an increasingly narrative questioning of humanitarian aid and international cooperation (Huser 2024). A discussion on possible courses of action seems urgently needed to achieve better coordinated and more effective European humanitarian aid.

Based on the analysis presented, initial recommendations should first focus on **ten pragmatic suggestions for improving European coordination processes** despite shared obstacles. Moreover, **five relevant and realistic policy issues** for more effective coordination will be presented briefly for discussion, despite the described dilemmas.

## 5.1. Improved processes for European humanitarian coordination – options for action

### A) Consensus on reform ambitions

Leading European humanitarian donors should begin by aligning on the extent of their fundamental reform policy claims and ambitions. Establishing **a basic consensus on the fundamental level of reform needs** and joint ambitions is a prerequisite for agreeing on the necessary coordination efforts and mechanisms.

### B) Improved Brussels-Berlin coordination at all working levels

A significant improvement in the coordination and coherence of European humanitarian policies is impossible **without leadership by the two largest donor actors, the EC and Germany**. Closer coordination between Brussels and Berlin, extending beyond acute issues and crises and to all relevant working levels, would be essential.

### C) Reform COHAFA

In a complex institutional structure like the EU, along with its cooperation with relevant non-members such as the UK, Switzerland, and Norway, formal institutional EU coordination bodies can only contribute to a limited extent. Nevertheless, this contribution could be significantly expanded, particularly regarding **COHAFA**. It should be **developed from the level of informative coordination to thematic coordination**. To this end, technically, a re-focusing of COHAFA on policy and fundamental issues should be considered, and reporting on crisis regions should only occur in acute exceptional cases. This would mark a departure from the current approach of equally weighted detailed briefings on crisis contexts and limitedly prepared and discussed policy questions. Furthermore, this would require substantive leadership and moderation by a proactive COHAFA Secretariat & Presidency, as well as systematic preparation of issues and thematic priorities by the Secretariat and competent member states.

### D) Focus on informal coordination forums

The flexibility of informal coordination forums is crucial in the intricate European structure. Currently, only **informal forums like bilateral exchange formats and the highly regarded Stockholm Group offer the necessary agility and expertise** of genuinely interested members for relevant discussions and substantive projects. However, they do not yet address fundamental reform questions of humanitarian policy in sustainable and strategic coordination, as would be necessary given the crisis of the humanitarian system and its financing. Bilateral exchange formats and consultations should therefore be systematised and focused on thematic coordination, especially by Brussels and Berlin with European partners.

### E) Moderately expand the Stockholm Group

Instead of creating another body alongside a functioning format like the **Stockholm Group**, it would be worth analysing how it could be made **even more effective and somewhat more inclusive**. “Another forum, yet another committee, etc., would mean even more appointments without much added value”, warns a government representative. Instead, the group could aim to expand its size to an **extent that does not jeopardise the agility and confidentiality of the exchange but brings on board relevant partners** who fit financially and in their positions with the largely like-minded Stockholm Group. This would give it a similar size to the Top 10 donor group, which, however, had a different, more long-term added value than the effective prioritisation of urgent humanitarian reform needs, partly because of the participation of Arab donor states. An expanded Stockholm Group could integrate European like-minded partners of financial relevance **such as Norway, Switzerland, France, or the Netherlands**. A former participant also suggests **developing strategic coordination** based on the topics irregularly introduced by individual actors today, by defining two to three focal points on which the group would like to work on as a priority in the longer term, and for which, for example, in coordination with the respective EU Council Presidency, substantive positions and projects could be prepared and further developed in the meetings, possibly within the framework of smaller **task forces**.

### F) Internal exchange on interest-driven funding decision

A comprehensive financial coordination of humanitarian pledges is both desirable and currently unrealistic. **Financial decisions often reflect national interests**, the desire for individual thematic profiling, or the need for visibility, such as pledges by government members during state visits. However, a more **transparent and confidential exchange about these interests** and their impact on upcoming funding decisions could significantly improve the efficiency and coordination of funding allocations. This is particularly important since several donors, like the EC and the **United Kingdom**, are not yet ready for more flexible and less earmarked funding allocations. A more transparent, confidential information exchange would be a prerequisite for identifying possible complementarities within the current interests and funding priorities. Even in this context, coordination appears erratic, with a top donor representative confirming this, particularly regarding the recent drastic cuts

**Limits of coordination: “We heard that news first time in the media”**



to the UK's humanitarian and development budgets. They criticised: "We heard that news first time in the media."

**G) Focused financial coordination on „Forgotten Crises“**

To prevent extreme misallocations of funds and promote a needs-based approach to **“Forgotten Crises,”** European actors should consider financial coordination of their funds for Forgotten Crises within a limited framework. For example, they could establish fixed consultations based on existing criteria catalogues like the ECHO Forgotten Crisis Assessment or other indexes (Westland 2023). **Limited financial coordination seems pragmatic and realistic,** particularly because many affected crisis regions, such as Ecuador, Peru, or Algeria, in absolute numbers involve manageable funds.

**H) Coordinate an expanded external consultation**

Individual European governments and the EC are occasionally advised externally on policies and programmes. However, this occurs in an uncoordinated and unsystematic way, with the results of the consultation processes rarely benefiting more actors than the commissioners. This leads to inefficient resource and knowledge management and a lack of evidence-based decision-making processes. These issues would become even more relevant, for example, in the future influential “prioritisation debate” of humanitarian budgets, as fundamentally different criteria and concepts among European donors threaten unforeseeable consequences. **European governments and the EC should therefore coordinate and structure their collaborations with research institutions** and their consultancy mandates more closely, making the **results a European common good**, and establish the humanitarian thought leadership that is currently lacking internationally.

**I) Improved regional coordination:**

**Establishing a humanitarian hub in Brussels**  
As outlined, Brussels is not perceived as a humanitarian hub that unites all relevant actors, thus hindering the emergence of informal networks, forums for knowledge exchange, and discourse, despite recent efforts by ECHO. Particularly striking is the absence of humanitarian research capacities and counterparts at the location of the annual Top 2 or Top 3 donor, the EC, while relevant institutes are present in almost all European capitals of medium-sized donors including Oslo, Madrid, and The Hague. Cooperation and promotion by the EC, coordinated with EU members, of such capacities could significantly **contribute to the development of a humanitarian hub in Brussels, fostering a focus and continuity of the EHF and other exchange formats** between politics, science, and practice. Additionally, **non-public**

**formats** that allow for honest discourse, as well as more comprehensive formats for deepening the topics defined as priorities, for example, in an **annual retreat of the Stockholm Group in Brussels**, should be considered.

**J) Improved regional coordination: National networks & hub/capital forums**

Beyond the level of European hubs and capitals, as outlined, there remains significant untapped potential for more **effective coordination at the national and regional levels** among European actors. This is particularly important due to the extreme disparity in the presence of humanitarian actors and needs, which must be improved to work more complementarily and effectively. Berlin has recently taken a first step by sharing a “guideline” with all relevant German embassies to expand the exchange with the Permanent Representations of the EC. This could be systematised, also with a view to other relevant European donors in **local exchange formats** that offer **substantial potential for thematic cooperation**, especially at regional hubs with the presence of differentiated ECHO Policy Teams.

Moreover, there is a lack of relevant **links between the national and European capital levels**, resulting in a **deficit in informative coordination**. A regular exchange between EU representations on-site and country desks in European ministries would be ideal for integrating humanitarian aspects and local know-how into all relevant decision-making processes at the working level. However, this may reach its limits with more than a few actors, as the importance of humanitarian issues is deprioritised in many institutions. A crucial initial step would be to enhance substantive policy exchange between national and European levels within the humanitarian sector, **particularly regarding the capacities of ECHO's technical experts**. ECHO could facilitate **informal hub/capital policy forums** for each of the policy themes represented by the technical experts in the regional hubs, offered as regular online formats. This approach would enable experts solely based in Europe from influential member states such as **Germany, Sweden, France, and Spain** to connect with on-site personnel to coordinate positions. Other EU members lacking specialists could utilise the forums as focused learning formats on topics like gender, protection, cash, WASH (Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene), etc.

## 5.2. Potential topics for increased policy coordination – no-gos and to-go

Even with significantly improved coordination mechanisms and a potential new reform dynamic, European actors will only be able to advance a few focus topics. It is necessary to select these with caution and manage expectations appropriately to avoid quick failures and the described goal conflicts of a political and practical nature. This is likely to lead to painful compromises, especially from the perspective of humanitarian practitioners. **A range of relevant topics appears to be challenging political minefields for the time being**, such as the often politically sensitive field of humanitarian diplomacy, institutionally sensitive issues of a better-integrated Nexus approach, or the frequently under-exposed humanitarian issues in the highly sensitive European political context of migration. Another long-discussed topic is the broadening of the donor base both internationally and within the EU, as well as fundamental questions about a future, possibly more multipolar

### **A no-go: European coordination of humanitarian diplomacy, the nexus, and donor base**

humanitarian system and a realignment of humanitarian principles (Slim 2022). This makes tangible progress in these fields hardly possible through better coordination in the short term. **For pragmatic reasons, the corresponding topic areas should be avoided for the time being for prioritised cooperation projects.**

To capitalise on the current momentum and amplify it through initial successes, it might be politically advisable to first prioritise a few relevant topic areas that are of mutual interest and simultaneously touch on limited political and financial interests. In conclusion, the following will briefly highlight **five topic areas** in which, based on previous analysis and the assessments of interviewees, **relevant policy progress could potentially be made through joint coordination efforts** of leading European donors, despite the obstacles mentioned.

### **A) Accountability of humanitarian agencies**

The issue of accountability is comprehensive and will continuously accompany the humanitarian sector, although it is not a new topic and has been a central element of the Grand Bargain since 2016. Especially concerning the largest aid organisations, the UN agencies WFP, UNHCR, and UNICEF, limited progress is evident in exercising the oversight function by donor states on more fundamental accountability issues such as partnership management (including at the local level), a sensible delineation of divisions of labour and mandates, monitoring and evaluation processes, etc. At the same time, the major UN agencies are considered **“too big to fail”** (according to one interviewee), which demonstrates that donors can only

influence these large entities in concert. As outlined, **far more systematic coordination processes are necessary for current issues, for preparing meetings of UN supervisory bodies, as well as for long-term reform needs.** This should be linked with a significantly improved exchange and network between donors anchored in crisis regions and their operational know-how on UN programmes and their contexts, such as ECHO, and influential donors without a base in crisis regions. As UN actors concede, change is predominantly only sustainable through concerted pressure from the donor side, which is why comprehensive progress on all levels of accountability issues requires a much more coordinated approach and prioritisation of this field by Europeans as well.

**Progress on all levels of accountability issues requires a much more coordinated approach and prioritisation of this field by Europeans**

### **B) Locally-led action and participation**

Another central topic for humanitarian reforms is the field of participation and locally-led aid. Progress in this area has been slow, with significant resistance from established aid organisations, including large international NGOs, which scored particularly poorly in a newly created index on localisation progress (Caritas Europa and CHA 2023). Donor governments have also made very limited commitments and pledges, leading to a significant need for action. However, the **resistance from donor governments is less politically or interest-driven** and more based on structural and institutional challenges, where they share many commonalities, as well as a lack of enforcement power over the aid organisations. **“Without donor pressure, we won’t significantly change in the area of localisation”**, admits a UN official. NGO representatives also demand that donors exert much more pressure on INGOs by making progress in local partnerships a prerequisite for funding (Caritas Europa and CHA 2023).

The obstacles to direct funding of local aid organisations are also very similar among European donor governments, including budget law constraints, lack of administrative structures, and the corresponding reluctance to engage in numerous direct partnerships with often very small local organisations. However, this situation also holds significant potential for coordinated efforts to **build larger local structures, such as consortia and local “pooled funds,”** as well as to realise the long-promised **“participation revolution”** in existing structures like the UN-led “Country-Based Pooled Funds” and in coordination bodies like the

local clusters, or their potential expansion towards stronger “area-based cooperation” with substantial local participation. None of these processes can be advanced by leading donors alone, which is why a **strategic priority of coordinated European donors** here could be a game-changer.

### C) Sanction regimes

A major challenge for humanitarian organisations amidst increasing conflicts and geopolitical upheavals is the issue of sanction regimes and their impact on humanitarian aid programmes. The challenges have been extensively analysed (Huvé, Moulin, and Ferraro 2024; Faltas 2021), while the need for action, especially on the European side, remains significant. Against the backdrop of the highly politicised top donor USA, which has enacted some of the strictest sanction regimes worldwide through the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act (The Washington Institute 2023), there is a particular need for European actors to create a **unique selling point** for the **urgently needed humanitarian exceptions internationally** and to anchor them in national law. This can only be achieved if European governments act in concert. “It’s of little use to know that Switzerland is on our side if Germany and other major donors do not commit effectively at the same time”, demands an NGO representative on behalf of many.

### D) Efficiency gains

Leading donors have identified enhancing the efficiency of humanitarian aid as a priority. However, one of the biggest challenges lies within the donor governments themselves, despite addressing transparency and reducing bureaucracy in the Grand Bargain 1.0 and 2.0. Progress in this area has been limited, despite it being in a field that, free from political interests, promises easy wins and efficiency gains (Metcalfe-Hough, Fenton, and Manji 2023; Südhoff and Milasiute 2021; Hövelmann 2022). Efficient financing decisions and evaluations are hindered by a lack of data, as tracking international financial flows is challenging due to strongly delayed and sometimes outdated reports. The issue extends to the national level, where top donors like Germany publish reports only every four years detailing the allocation of humanitarian aid. These reports, often in an aggregated state due to a lack of digitisation in the Foreign Office, prevent accurate assessments of how much humanitarian aid was spent on specific programs, such as food aid or WASH programmes, in previous years (GFFO 2022).

A significant challenge is the lack of **comparable data, which could be addressed through coordinated efforts**. Additionally, the immense burdens of comprehensive bureaucratic reporting for humanitarian actors lead to a multitude of diverse national templates and reporting obligations, creating an enormous **administrative effort**. At the same time,

solutions to these challenges have been on the table for a long time and were very concretely and explicitly commissioned by donor governments, such as the “8+3” reporting format developed under German leadership, which would enable a uniform approach for all donor governments and indirect donors like UN agencies. However, only a minority of actors has implemented this format systematically. There is a lack of **coordinated effort** to enforce **simple efficiency advances that would greatly benefit humanitarian actors**.

**Even simple efficiency gains from coordinated donors would be of great value to humanitarian organisations.**

### E) Humanitarian aid and social welfare in fragile/authoritarian states

The global trend of increasing authoritarianism (Brot für die Welt 2024) and the rise of fragile crisis contexts (Fund for Peace 2023) also pose great, joint challenges for Western humanitarian aid donors. Beyond challenges like humanitarian access and humanitarian diplomacy, complex questions arise, such as how aid can be provided in politically objectionable authoritarian regimes like in Syria, Afghanistan, or large parts of the Sahel after the recent series of coups without forming political alliances with local rulers or indirectly strengthening them.

For many Western donors, the preferred method for many years has been a strict limitation to humanitarian aid programmes. In the **discourse on the right balance between relief, recovery, and reconstruction in post-conflict settings**, this approach focuses on a purely humanitarian relief focus to avoid providing politically ambiguous assistance to socio-economic progress. Out of fear of not only rehabilitating infrastructures but thereby also legitimising authoritarian structures, European actors, for example, in Syria, even in the 13th year of the war, rely on a purely humanitarian aid approach, which is at the same time very inefficient and unsustainable. The example of water transportation to Syrian communities is often cited, which, depending on the estimate, requires up to ten times more aid than repairing the local water supply, which many actors would prefer to pursue instead (ICRC 2021). Given multiple comparable crises, aid organisations have been calling for years for a debate on the framework within which **humanitarian aid, which is also allowed to invest in basic infrastructure**, can be implemented and promoted. At least in contexts where leading European donors take a largely uniform stance on local regimes like in Syria or Afghanistan, such coordination would provide significant potential for both **efficiency gains** and more **effective humanitarian aid** in key humanitarian crises.

## 6. Outlook

Some of the recommendations and hands on proposals for better coordination of European humanitarian actors and thus the world's largest humanitarian donor outlined in this paper may appear technical, process-oriented, or timid. Some could already stand for **substantial, wide-spread progress** in fields such as improved **accountability** of key humanitarian UN and INGO actors, for significantly increased **efficiency**, or for meaningful progress with regard to **locally led humanitarian aid**.

The recommendations are by no means sufficient to address all the urgent fundamental reform questions of the humanitarian system. They do **not yet provide European answers** to questions about the future positioning of **humanitarian aid in the context** of dynami-

cally evolving **security debates and geopolitical interests**. Let alone to provide answers for the future aid in a potentially **multipolar humanitarian system** and its growing grey areas and **lines of compromise in questions of humanitarian principles** in the exchange of traditional Western donors and new actors like China, India, and the Arab world, etc.

However, progress in some of the exemplarily mentioned **five fields could bring about significant reforms of humanitarian aid after many years of stagnation**. This could set **powerful examples for a successful, coordinated European agenda-setting**, thus initially building the framework in which a **much-needed European humanitarian reform engine could gain momentum**.

## Endnoten

- 1 The terms "European states" or Europe refer to around 45 to 50 states, with the concrete number depending on their interpretation. This paper follows a narrow definition and refers to the 45 European states which, from a geographical point of view, are indisputably considered to be located entirely in Europe (thereby excluding Russia, Georgia, Kazakhstan and Turkey) and whose independence status is not disputed, as in the case of Kosovo and Transnistria. Importantly, this does not imply any judgement (DSW and PRB 2019).
- 2 Recently, this trend has been facilitated in some European countries by their welcoming of a significant number of Ukrainian refugees. In accordance with OECD / DAC criteria, the associated costs can be temporarily counted towards the ODA quota.
- 3 Non-representative survey among event participants on humanitarian trends 2024. Charting the course: Navigating 2024's humanitarian landscape (The New Humanitarian 2024).
- 4 Statement by the Hungarian representative at the opening panel of the European Humanitarian Forum (EHF) 2023 (EHF 2023)
- 5 In this analysis, the term accountability is understood in a broad sense and includes questions of cost and efficiency-oriented accountability as well as participation and social accountability towards affected populations (see Humanitarian Accountability Reports (2022)).



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