

Executive Summary

Influencer Europe

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

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What is the state of European humanitarian policy coordination?

Calls for reforming humanitarian action are currently louder than they have been in years, fuelled by a growing funding gap and at least 300 million people in need worldwide. There is a growing consensus that the current humanitarian system is not fit for purpose and requires fundamental reforms. **Europe, as the world's largest donor** and home to nine out of twelve of the world's top donors, **must address this need for reform**. However, with 27 EU member states and three top European

donors outside the EU, each with different interests and policies, coordinating **European humanitarian policy poses a significant challenge**. Coherence in key issues among European state actors is a prerequisite for leveraging the current momentum for reform. Consequently, this paper aims to explore how European humanitarian policy is currently coordinated, which **forums of coordination** need to be reconsidered or established and which **humanitarian issues show promise for success amidst the complexities of differing political interests and conflicting national priorities**.

Key Findings

Despite their diversity, humanitarian stakeholders, including local NGOs, UN organisations and donor governments, **agree that the humanitarian system requires fundamental reform**. While these actors have differing perspectives on key challenges, such as the increase in fragile, authoritarian, and conflict-ridden humanitarian contexts, decolonization and localization debates, and the relevance of human-induced climate change for humanitarian action, there is shared recognition of the urgent need for reform. The persistently widening funding gap for an already prioritised number of people in need has created a **common momentum for reform and a new dynamic among donor governments** in the Global North, with the latter focusing on prioritisation, efficiency, and accountability.

Against this backdrop, **the focus is shifting to European donor governments**, which contribute 43% of global humanitarian funding, surpassing the US in financial resources and influence (see Figure 1). This is particularly crucial as there are concerns that humanitarian issues may be significantly deprioritised by the US after the upcoming elections. Moreover, contrary to the global trend, several EU member states have recently increased their international engagement in financial terms (see Figure 2). At the same time, **Europe is perceived to have limited coordination in terms of foreign policy and lacks strategic capability**, an aspect that has not been analysed in the context of

humanitarian policies. Furthermore, international discussions on humanitarian coordination have predominantly focused on operational matters.

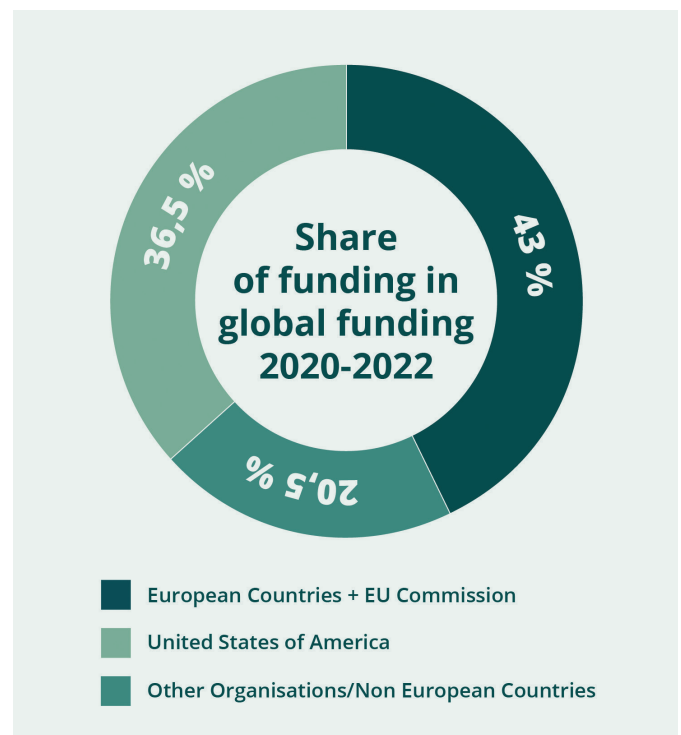


Figure 1: Share of global humanitarian funding by geographical groups 2020-2022 in per cent / Source: OCHA FTS 2024

Consequently, this paper analyses the **status quo of European humanitarian coordination**, examining its **forums** and regional **levels** in Europe and in crisis regions. It considers entities like COHAFA, the DG Group and the HAC, along with informal bodies such as the Stockholm Group, the E6, the Group of Nordics and other local networks. This analysis is conducted through three categories: the **informative**, the **thematic** and the **strategic level of coordination**.

The analysis identifies structural weaknesses in European coordination, indicating a lack of both effective and inclusive coordination forums. Moreover, it identifies **strategic motives** for state actors to prioritise profiling, visibility and autonomy over cooperation in certain areas. Building on this, it identifies **areas**, such as humanitarian diplomacy and institutional nexus issues, **where achieving significantly improved coordination** may be challenging due to political interests and hard power considerations. The paper offers **ten recommendations for enhancing European coordination processes and five pragmatic proposals for thematic policy fields** in which substantial progress for humanitarian action could be made. These proposed changes could **lay the groundwork and generate momentum for Europe** to transition from a polyphonic choir to a significant influencer in humanitarian policies and major reforms, through more strategic coordination in the medium term.

There is a lack of both effective and inclusive coordination forums

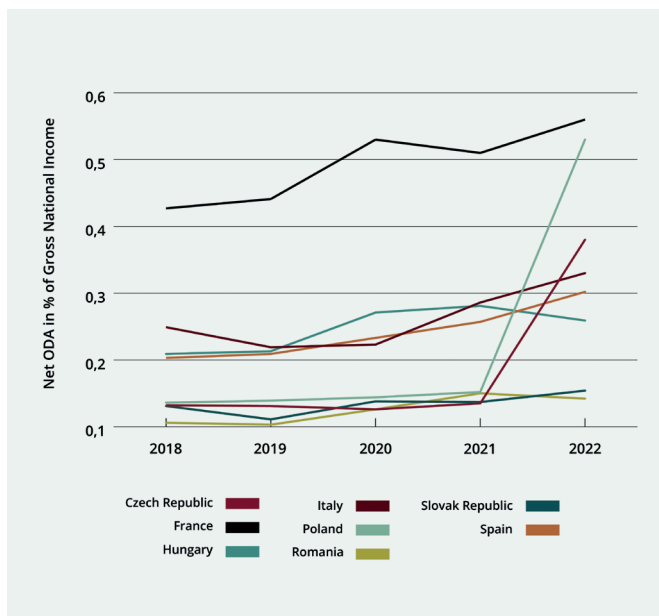


Figure 2: Ratio of budgets for ODA to GNI by state / Source: OECD 2024

Recommendations

The analysis outlines **ten recommendations for improved coordination processes**, including:

- **Reforming COHAFA** into a policy-oriented forum that could evolve from informative to thematic coordination levels.
- **Focusing on informal coordination forums** such as the Stockholm Group, which could be moderately expanded and elevated to a strategic coordination level.
- Establishing a systematic **exchange regarding interest-driven funding decisions** to achieve complementarity plus coordinate funding of so-called forgotten crises.
- Enhancing regional coordination through the continued development **of a humanitarian hub in Brussels** and informal **local networks**.
- Improving **coordination** of European donors' **collaboration** with **research institutions** for joint evidence-based policies.

In addition, the paper identifies **five potential areas of reform** that exclude currently politically sensitive issues, while allowing substantial humanitarian reforms through more strategic European coordination:

1. **Accountability of humanitarian agencies**
2. **Locally-led action & participation**
3. **Sanction regimes and humanitarian exceptions**
4. **Efficiency gains**
5. **Humanitarian aid and social welfare in fragile/authoritarian states**

Methods in brief

The paper synthesises insights from 28 semi-structured interviews conducted in Brussels, Geneva, Cairo, Amman, Berlin, Rome, Bern, and Oslo, along with the limited literature available on European humanitarian coordination. Given the complexity of the topic, it focuses on the coordination of humanitarian policies among politically and financially leading European donor governments (Top 10), including the European Commission.

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Ralf Südhoff has been the Director of the Centre for Humanitarian Action (CHA) since 2019, where his projects cover European humanitarian policies, Germany's strategic capabilities in foreign policy and humanitarian action as well as the Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus. Before joining CHA, he worked for the World Food Programme (WFP) and the German Development Ministry (BMZ), among others.

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