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## The European Union's Actorness and Presence in Humanitarian Assistance Affairs

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As the first international organisation of its kind and very much a *sui generis* actor in the global sphere, the European Union's policies have developed significantly in the area of humanitarian assistance affairs. The EU is unique in a variety of ways in this arena, from being a pioneer in disbursing aid before any state actor, to the creation of institutions that take on very specific responsibilities. This paper will focus on the European Union's 'actorness' and 'presence' within the realm of humanitarian assistance affairs, as defined by Bretherton and Vogler. According to Bretherton and Vogler, the term 'actorness' is attributed to an institution that "exhibits a degree of autonomy from its external environment and...its internal constituents...that is capable of formulating purposes and making decisions." [1] 'Actorness' is an umbrella term that encompasses the idea of 'presence'. Therefore, this paper will focus on three elements of actorness: capability, opportunity and presence.

Though the area of humanitarian assistance affairs has two aspects of emergency humanitarian aid and development aid, this paper will focus on the former because the EU has proven to be a proactive leader in this arena. Unlike development aid, which can be dealt with on a longer-term basis, humanitarian aid needs to be disbursed quickly, often in response to emergency situations. [2] This makes the EU's actorness and presence in this field even more proactive. This paper will argue that the Union's development within the realm of humanitarian aid is mostly due to key roles that its institutions play, specifically the European Community Humanitarian Office. Though the Member States do play a role within the construction of EU's humanitarian aid policies, the institutions contribute significantly to formulating and executing humanitarian policies and programmes on the European Union's behalf.

The involvement of the European Union in the field of humanitarian affairs dates back to the 1970s, even before the Union was officially and concretely established as an actor; individual Member States still provided humanitarian assistance to countries that had suffered from natural and man-made disasters. This process started with Africa but, aid was extended to Latin America, Asia and the Mediterranean countries. [3] EU-ACP relations date back to 1975, when the European Union signed the Lomé Agreement with 71 Asian, Caribbean and Pacific Countries. While a major purpose of this relationship was development assistance, humanitarian assistance was also an element of this agreement as many of the ACP countries were impoverished and suffering countries in Africa in dire need of aid. Established pillars within the humanitarian assistance realm leaned more toward respecting international humanitarian law and rights of citizens in affected countries, as well as development categories such as good governance. [4] However, the rhetoric of humanitarian law and assistance has historically been present within the Union.

### Capability

After the establishment of the Union and up until 1992, the responsibility for disbursing humanitarian aid lay within the hands of various Directorate-Generals within the Commission; as requests for aid and provision of funds increased, the Directorate-Generals pooled and delegated their powers to create the office of ECHO (European Community Humanitarian Office) in 1992 to represent the EU as a unified actor in the global sphere. The creation of a supranational institution by a supranational institution is unique; the existing institution, the Commission, combined and delegated some of its powers to create a new institution solely for dealing with requests and disbursement of

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humanitarian aid for affected countries. This separated that element of the Commission's responsibilities to a Union institution created for this specific purpose.

The creation of ECHO in and of itself demonstrates the Union's capability well. ECHO functions as an independent actor from external humanitarian organisations to a certain degree, as well as from internal institutions such as the Commission and Council. It has formulated mechanisms that allow for decision-making on various elements of humanitarian assistance. Since its inception, ECHO has been actively involved in providing humanitarian aid, such as food, equipment and medical supplies, to over one hundred countries around the world.[5] The fact that the European Union has taken such a significant measure proves that its capability in this field has notably increased; the Union established an administrative structure above those of individual Member States, to handle the disbursement of humanitarian assistance. In addition, the ability of ECHO to make decisions in times of urgency in rapidly providing much-needed assistance to an affected country, shows the Union to be an effective international actor within the arena of humanitarian affairs.

Another way that the European Union has asserted its capability within humanitarian affairs is by broadening its definition of humanitarian assistance. This has enabled it as an entity to adequately make effective decisions regarding humanitarian aid. Traditionally, humanitarian assistance was taken to mean emergency relief in times of natural disasters. In fact, "the thrust in the early years was on food assistance. This shifted to...humanitarian aid for victims of disasters and armed conflicts, environmental rehabilitation..."[6] When demand for aid increased around the world during the 1990s, the Union expanded its definition of "disasters" to include man-made disasters, such as terrorist attacks, civil wars and displacement by militiamen within a country, where innocent civilians suffer as a result of some struggle. In addition, the Union adopted a broader definition of humanitarian aid for conflict prevention to "actions undertaken over the short-term to reduce manifest tensions and to prevent the outbreak of violent conflict"[7], in accordance with the Development Assistance Committee's definition. By simply enlarging the definition of humanitarian aid, the Union has also increased its capability in this field; it now makes decisions regarding provision of emergency assistance to a broader range of conditions, including emergency relief to disaster victims and assisting refugees.[8] By providing assistance to countries suffering from a wider range of maladies and disasters, the Union establishes itself as an actor in various fields within humanitarian affairs, as opposed to confining itself to providing aid *only* for a certain type of disaster.

The creation of ECHO has legitimised the role of the European Union in humanitarian affairs; where the Commission lacked cohesiveness in providing aid, ECHO as a supranational institution seeks to combine different priorities regarding the disbursement of aid to affected countries into one policy so that the EU is presented as a unified actor on the global stage. The Commission has furthered its capability in this field by giving ECHO a legal basis to function as a legitimate supranational institution within the Union; ironically, this was given to ECHO by the Member States, who tend to have their own independent humanitarian aid policies. However, Member States decided to pool together and delegate some powers to ECHO considering the dire emergencies that ECHO deals with, and can take action more swiftly than individual Member States can. Both the Member States and institutions of the Union felt that giving some power and clout to making ECHO a supranational institution in and of itself would present the EU as an undivided actor in this field.

In addition to legal competence, ECHO follows much less restrictive procedures than most other Commission services because the Commission's decision-making procedures were deemed ill-suited to acute emergencies[9]. This is also unique; usually, an institution created within the Union follows the rules and procedural constraints of the Union institution that created it. However, since ECHO's primary purpose is to respond quickly and effectively to disasters, and the Commission can take a prolonged amount of time to decide the best course of action, the Commission has given ECHO the freedom to stray from rigorous Commission standards in making swift decisions regarding aid disbursement. This is generally a rare move; institutions concentrate the power within themselves in order to be more effective and make coherent decisions on behalf of the European Union. The case of ECHO is unique in that the Directorate-Generals of the Commission all decided to share the power with another fellow Union institution, for a very tailored purpose. For the Commission to allow the institution that it created to stray from strict Commission procedures in making decisions for emergency aid, is new and refreshing.

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The European Union has taken a very proactive step with the creation of ECHO and the broadening of the definition of 'humanitarian assistance'. It has increased its actorness in this field by merging the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) with aid for disaster prevention, to a certain extent. There are many elements of CSDP that go hand in hand with providing effective humanitarian assistance to affected countries: this paper will focus on the use of military force to carry out humanitarian missions, and a more effective response to humanitarian disasters with the proper instruments.

## **The Role of Military Force in Humanitarian Missions**

By giving the CSDP a role to play in the realm of humanitarian affairs, the Council ensures that man-made humanitarian disasters are not only prevented to the best of the Union's ability, but in the event of such a disaster, that the Union can respond swiftly in delivering assistance to the affected country in question. With this role, the Union's humanitarian missions are reinforced because NGOs and ECHO face lesser obstacles when delivering aid. Aid adopts a more official connotation with European military/police forces supporting and helping to execute humanitarian missions, including rescue missions<sup>[10]</sup> and swift delivery of emergency aid. This way, the supranational institutions obtain more support in the delivery of aid, as well as an added dimension of legitimacy for the Union in humanitarian affairs within the affected country.

## **A More Effective Response with More Effective Instruments**

There are specific "rapid-reaction"<sup>[11]</sup> missions within the CSDP that can be adopted to work with humanitarian missions. Generally, these missions are designed to prevent political conflicts such as war, where the Union would be more involved. However, by combining elements of the CSDP within humanitarian affairs, the Commission and Council ensure that these missions can be applied toward urgent humanitarian disasters in third countries; the missions can deliver aid even more quickly and effectively, even in situations involving natural disasters. Key supranational institutions, such as the Commission and Council, can also consider merging these missions with ECHO's Fast-Decision Procedure to ensure that both decisions about the aid to be delivered, as well as the methods, can be swift and effective. Overall, the combination of certain elements of CSDP with humanitarian assistance by supranational institutions within the Union increases its external legitimacy and improves its external relations. It provides the Union with the ability to anticipate conflicts and apply procedures to either prevent them, or to provide rapid aid and assistance.

A major critique of many scholars is that despite various attempts, the Union does not come across as a unified actor. While ECHO does its job well in disbursing emergency aid, its objectives do not always match those of the other institutions', nor those of the Member States'. To display a united presence within the sphere of humanitarian assistance affairs, the EU has established the Civil Protection Mechanism, which Member States can utilise as a forum to make their humanitarian aid policies known to ECHO. However, this does not facilitate a cohesive agreement between EU institutions and the Member States regarding a humanitarian aid policy; there is still significant incoherence within the Union on how to reconcile differing views among its elements to present itself as a truly unified actor.

## **Opportunity**

ECHO has been created to be an apolitical institution, meant to provide humanitarian aid and emergency assistance to affected countries without getting involved in the political happenings within that country, and without letting those political occurrences affect their provision of aid to said country. This is unique when juxtaposed with the fact that the Union's institutions are very much politically oriented when it comes to external policies; creating ECHO to be an institution that is detached from political events within a country and to focus solely on providing humanitarian assistance makes ECHO that much more independent in its own right, within the Union's institutional structure. Certainly, the EU has encountered many external opportunities to prove itself. For instance, after the coup against Sierra Leone's President Kabbah in 1997, ECHO continued to work in the country to provide emergency assistance and humanitarian aid<sup>[12]</sup>, not letting the uprisings affect its objectives within Sierra Leone. Similarly, when the Union suspended aid to Palestine in 2006 because Hamas was in control, humanitarian aid continued to flow from the

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Union to the people. The European Union has been involved to help the victims, regardless of context or current turmoil within a country. Even when the Union was faced with providing humanitarian aid to the Western Balkans, whose turmoil emerged because of Eastern enlargement issues, ECHO continued to provide aid to the region since the first outbreak of the war.[13] Though one of the reasons for this fight to break out was an issue that is very close to the institutions of the Union, it was able to detach itself from the political aspects of it and provide aid as needed, to the people who needed it the most; in fact, the Union continued to provide aid from the first outbreak all the way through to the end of the war.

By utilising ECHO's apolitical nature, the Union hopes to gain more legitimacy in the global community by acting swiftly to react to disasters. It also seeks to further European integration by appealing to the citizens, hoping that citizens will put aside their differences and unite/integrate to help others in need. In 2001, the Commission granted the Fast-Decision Procedure to ECHO. This procedure was introduced to facilitate swift decision-making regarding disbursement of emergency aid response. It allows ECHO to make "primary humanitarian decisions"[14] within 48 hours regarding aid emergencies, albeit with a limit on disbursement amount. This further enhances the supranational nature of ECHO by giving it more autonomous powers, though with some limits regarding amount and timeframe for the decisions. It also enhances the actorness of the Union in this field because with this procedure, the Union can be seen as a more effective actor, able to make quick decisions and react faster than many actual states in the global community regarding emergency response. Essentially, the European Union seeks to be a pioneer in the field of humanitarian affairs.

In addition, the EU has set a goal for itself to beat a world power that all affected countries look to for humanitarian assistance, the United States of America. By regarding the USA as the 'other', the EU has sought to be first in humanitarian assistance affairs, such as with speed of response and amount of aid to affected countries. Through ECHO, the Union has become the second largest donor of humanitarian assistance, right after the USA.[15] The Union has had many opportunities to take first place in this field, as is the goal. For instance, the EU was the first to respond to the 2004 tsunami disaster in terms of pledging aid to victims in all the affected countries, even before the USA. In a way, the EU looks at America as the goal to beat and surpass, especially in the realm of humanitarian assistance affairs. Indeed, in the early 2000s, there was a wide margin between the USA's and the European Union's contributions to humanitarian assistance programs and initiatives; "in 2001, Europe spent \$2.55 billion on emergency aid, compared with \$1.97 billion spent by the United States." [16] Moreover, in 2003, ECHO spent €600 million in humanitarian assistance programmes worldwide, many of these programmes involving projects in failed states.[17] Evidently, the Union takes its avant-garde role within the domain of humanitarian assistance affairs seriously, and seeks to top a 'world power' state actor in this field to increase its actorness and presence in the global community. Additionally, findings of many studies conducted within the affected countries about the EU's programmes, reveal that the EU's emergency aid has reduced dropout rates among children[18] within many of these impoverished countries. The Union started out by creating ECHO solely to manage disbursement of humanitarian aid. The Union has built on this initial effort by providing aid to the extent that it changes negative statistics within the affected countries. This is truly a move on behalf of the EU as a dedicated actor with a significant presence in humanitarian affairs.

## **Presence**

The European Union has also established itself within the realm of humanitarian assistance affairs through its presence and the level of prominence with which it plays a role. Specifically, the EU recognised humanitarian assistance as a significant soft-power area. As a result, it has prioritised humanitarian assistance policies to a great extent and has made significant headway in this arena. To start with, the sources for ECHO's budget do not come from one single source. ECHO's significantly large budget of over €700 million a year comes not only from the Community budget, but also from the European Development Fund (EDF) and the Emergency Aid Reserve; the latter is solely to help ECHO respond to unforeseen disasters and humanitarian emergencies. Though the European Union has procedures at its disposal that can help it to anticipate events and be prepared for aid disbursal, it covers all ground by earmarking a specific amount of funds just for unpredicted disasters. By covering all potential scenarios, the Union increases its presence worldwide; it can be the first to respond no matter what type of humanitarian aid it is dealing with. This makes the EU a pioneer within the field of humanitarian assistance affairs in the global sphere, as

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many state actors do not have such a multitude of mechanisms for swift disaster response within affected countries. For instance, the Union has played a large role in Tanzania, giving a significant amount of humanitarian aid during the Burundi civil war, specifically for emergency supplies and endeavours such as urban water supply renovation.[19] Providing aid to countries in dire need in the midst of civil wars shows the EU's presence where institutions like the UN, or even 'world powers' like the United States of America, are not willing to involve themselves in. ECHO's inherently apolitical nature, established at the time of creation, helps the EU to increase its presence to provide aid not only to countries in the aftermath of a disaster, but even in the midst of disasters.

Humanitarian aid funding comes directly from EU institutions, where ECHO cooperates directly with recipient governments to deliver emergency aid. The Union asserts its presence even further by channelling its funds through organisations within the affected countries to help cover more ground and have more organisations on the EU's side, with regard to humanitarian assistance. This shows other developed states that the EU takes its 'leadership' role in the area of humanitarian assistance very seriously, and prioritises its policies to take a variety of steps to ensure that aid is given when needed, to those in need. For instance, GUARDIAN, an aid and development program in Somalia, was created by a Somali government official to help provide short-term humanitarian aid and long-term development aid to Somali citizens. The European Community, now including supranational organisations such as ECHO, have been heavily involved in providing humanitarian assistance to Somalis using the GUARDIAN program as a channel, especially regarding ethnic Somali refugees.[20] The EU has sought to make its presence known far and wide to affected countries around the world, in the field of humanitarian assistance. With this example of Somalia, the Union has provided by giving emergency food rations and medical/rehabilitation supplies; in addition, the EU has also been involved in sustainable development within this region, helping to rebuild Somali livestock and re-establish their farming, the main source of livelihood. Furthermore, the European Commission (via ECHO) has established its presence in Somalia as the biggest donor left within its borders after UNOSOM II, a UN agency, departed.[21] The aims of international organisations such as the United Nations, have played a role in the EU's shaping of its humanitarian assistance institutions, specifically ECHO.[22] However, it is also clear that the EU seeks to go beyond the humanitarian contributions of the UN and establish itself as a unique actor in this field, by continuing on or initiating where the UN or USA are not willing to do so. It is clear that the European Union sees humanitarian assistance as a door to engaging in more sustainable development within a certain country, to establish its presence there and gain support of affected countries in favour of the European Union.

The European Union also channels its humanitarian assistance and aid through NGOs launched by its own Member States, thereby establishing its presence with donors already known worldwide for providing emergency humanitarian assistance; this way, the EU can also be rhetorically associated with, and included among, the list of these large donor institutions. Additionally, the fact that ECHO requires that its name and logo must be prominently displayed on all supplies bought with ECHO money within a certain country[23], serves to cement its presence within said country. This action also serves to show the global community that despite critiques, the Union can behave as a unified actor in the realm of humanitarian assistance affairs. The Union has close ties with an organisation of one of the larger Member States, the UK Department for International Development (DFID). Though based in the UK, DFID is one of the world's largest donor organisations. The European Union works closely with DFID to implement humanitarian assistance programs within affected countries. In return, the UK as a national entity within the European Union, supports some of the European Union-wide humanitarian relief efforts.[24] Through this mutually reciprocated relationship, the Union strives to achieve a cohesive presence within the field of humanitarian assistance affairs. Though the Union does not necessarily have to work so closely with humanitarian organisations within any of its Member States, it chooses to strengthen this partnership to highlight how much of a priority the EU gives to humanitarian aid.

The larger donor countries within the European Union are leaders in and of themselves.[25] They construct aid programmes and policies for affected countries, generally following a pattern of providing aid to the countries that they colonised; this has also led organisations and states to critique that the EU is not a unified actor in this sphere. In the field of humanitarian aid, many of the Member States tend to give aid to countries in need that had previously been their colonies, which is not unbiased aid, given on a need basis regardless of historical ties. However, the EU has a goal of utilising humanitarian assistance affairs as a platform to further European integration, on a more humane and feel-good level that citizens can relate to, as opposed to very business-like and detached affairs like

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trade relations. Additionally, The EDF's funding comes from Member States outside of the EU's budget[26], which shows that though the supranational institutions play the major role in humanitarian assistance affairs within the Union, the Member States do play a significant role in a EU-wide humanitarian assistance policy, especially providing ECHO with funding earmarked for different sectors within humanitarian aid.

## Conclusion

Since the European Union first forayed into the field of humanitarian assistance affairs, it has demonstrated significant actorness, through capability, opportunity and presence. It has done so both in the measures it has taken, and the policies and institutions that it has created, solely for this purpose. The Union seeks to be a one-of-a-kind presence in this field as a *sui generis* actor. Its goal is to prove to the global community that even though it is not a state in the traditional sense, it can still set great precedents in the field of humanitarian assistance affairs, ahead of many traditional states and existing international organisations. From the statistics and figures that have emerged since the establishment of ECHO, the Union is well on its way to doing just that.

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