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FOOD ASSISTANCE:
WHAT ROLE FOR EU-UN COORDINATION?

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Food assistance: what role for EU-UN coordination?

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Abstract

The European Union (EU) is committed to providing humanitarian aid to people affected by natural and man-made crises; likewise the United Nations (UN) is also a major player in humanitarian aid provision. This paper considers whether and how the EU and the UN coordinate when shaping and implementing food assistance policy. It does so by focussing on two cases where the EU is especially invested, Ethiopia and Chad. The paper then addresses the EU's role vis-à-vis the UN: is it only a donor or does it play an active role in the food assistance policy process? The article seeks to contribute to EU humanitarian aid literature and to empirical research on the effectiveness of the coordination between the EU and the UN.

Keywords *United Nations (UN); European Union (EU); World Food Programme (WFP); European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (DG ECHO); coordination; food assistance policy.*

INTRODUCTION

Natural disasters have become more frequent in recent years, mainly due to global warming and climate change. In addition, natural resources are under pressure due to population growth. These themes are at the heart of numerous debates at international level. Since 2016, for instance, the United Nations (UN) has promoted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Its main goals are to end poverty and hunger, to enhance food security and ensure healthy lives, and to promote well-being for all.

In this context, the European Union (EU), whose role as international actor has been increasing over the last twenty years,¹ and the UN share the same values and goals. Since 2003, with the European Security Strategy (ESS), the EU has committed itself to effective multilateralism and to supporting the UN as it responds to threats to international peace and

¹ Following the Maastricht Treaty and the establishment of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), and later the Treaty of Lisbon, which conferred legal personality to the EU through article 47, the EU has been allowed to develop and to establish clearer relationships with International Organisations and Third Parties. For an in depth historical and political analysis on EU foreign policy and its objectives see Smith (2014); Lequesne (2013); Carta (2012); Laursen (2012); M.E. Smith (2003); Dumond and Setton (1999). See also documents: Global Strategy for Foreign Policy (2016); Treaty of Lisbon (2007); European Security Strategy (2003); Treaty of Amsterdam (1998); Treaty of Maastricht (1992). For the debate on what kind of international power the EU is, see: Whitman (2006); Smith (2005); Telò (2004).

security. Furthermore, both organisations are committed to international cooperation to solve economic, cultural and social problems.

The EU is one of the largest international aid donors and has financially intervened in all major crises, such as in Syria, Iraq, South Sudan, the Central African Republic and Ukraine and the Ebola crisis. As a result, 121 million people affected by disasters, either natural or man-made, received help and 80 countries received humanitarian aid.²

The fields in which the EU has been active have grown and multiplied, to include: food assistance; nutrition; water, sanitation and hygiene; health; emergency shelter; disaster risk reduction; gender and age-sensitive aid. The Directorate-General (DG) responsible for shaping and supervising the implementation of humanitarian aid policies is DG European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (DG ECHO). The implementation of these policies is carried out by third parties and, in particular, UN agencies, such as World Food Programme (WFP).

It is then important to focus on the relationship between the EU and the UN.³ The EU's relations with the UN have been strengthening in the last ten years and today both practitioners and academics talk about EU-UN cooperation and coordination. Indeed, by focusing on just one humanitarian aid policy, that is food assistance, the paper seeks to empirically answer the question whether and how the UN, through WFP, and the EU, through DG ECHO, coordinate when shaping and implementing food assistance policy.

Before moving forward, it is useful to draw a distinction between the terms 'coordination', 'cooperation' and 'collaboration', although the literature frequently uses these terms interchangeably. A definition of coordination, which I will take into consideration throughout the paper, can be found at UN level, in a report by the former UN Secretary-General, Boutros-Ghali (1994: para. 213):

coordination means a clear allocation of responsibilities, an effective division of labour among the many actors involved in development, and a commitment by each of those actors to work towards common and compatible goals and objectives. Individual development actors must strive to make their efforts complementary and contributory, rather than isolated or competing. Coordination, so viewed, must guide the actions of each these actors and the interactions among them.

Consequently, when actors are pursuing common goals, coordination should bring greater

² See Annual Report on the European Union's Humanitarian Aid and Civil Protection Policies and their Implementation in 2014 (2015).

http://ec.europa.eu/echo/files/media/publications/annual_report/2014/COM_2015_406_en.pdf

³ For a thorough definition of the EU and the UN as IOs, reference should be made to IR literature. In particular: Archer (2015); Martin and Simmons (2013); Mazzei, Marchetti and Petito (2010); Hill and Smith (2005); Barnett and Finnemore (2004); Mearsheimer (1994-1995).

coherence and effectiveness through a clear distribution of responsibilities.

What about the other two concepts, collaboration and cooperation? When researching the term ‘collaboration’ most of the literature is concentrated on the public sector and on governments’ behaviour, though it has also been a concept adopted in the private sector. It has been defined as follows: “collaboration occurs when people from different organisations produce something together through joint effort, resources and decision-making and share ownership of the final product or service” (Kemnsky and Burlin, 2005: 8). Cooperation can be simply defined as “action for the common benefit” (Colomer, 2011: 2). Thus, cooperation between different actors means that they do not have conflicting or competitive exchanges, but try to find appropriate ways of action to pursue common goals for a common benefit.

Contrary to most literature that interchangeably uses cooperation, collaboration and coordination, I argue that they are different from one another. Collaboration and cooperation are broader concepts, while coordination is more specific and a consequence of cooperation. Coordination, then, is the result of actors who have previously decided to cooperate.⁴ In the context of international regimes (Krasner, 1983), which provide a framework of principles, norms and procedures that help overcome obstacles to agreements, actors are more willing to cooperate. From their willingness to cooperate stems the need to coordinate. Thus, coordination is, at the same time, both an outcome and a factor that increases and strengthens cooperation itself.

EU-UN cooperation⁵ might be considered to take different forms. The EU is one of the major contributors to the UN system: it contributes to the budget of the UN, to UN funds and to peace-keeping operations. Another form of cooperation is the EU’s participation in the UN, as an “observer”, where it has limited powers in the organisations’ activities, or a “full member”, being considered at same level as Member States.⁶

Why bother to ask if there is coordination between DG ECHO and WFP when shaping and implementing food assistance policy?

First of all, contrary to UN humanitarian and development aid policies, which have attracted much attention in the literature (e.g. Stokke) and in current debates such as those over the

⁴ The concept of cooperation is considered differently by the main International Relations paradigms. Realists consider it as something very difficult to realise and able to work only if States have attentively assessed their relative gains. Liberalists have an opposite vision, seeing it as a positive sum game: if the cake becomes bigger, then it is better for everyone. For further in-depth analysis see Mearsheimer (1994-1995); Keohane (1989). On what prompts States and IOs to cooperate see also Hudson, Hardy, Henwood, Wistow (1999).

⁵ When talking about EU-UN cooperation, it is important to also consider the EU’s internal coordination. Indeed, guaranteeing internal coordination is crucial to ensure the solidity and consistency of the cooperation between the EU and the UN. At the centre of this internal coordination are EU delegations, which convene, set the agenda and chair all EU meetings (Zappia, 2015). The common position of the EU, resulting from internal coordination, is clear only if internal coordination has proven to be effective.

⁶ For further in-depth analysis and issues entailed see Kaddous (2015) and Wouters, Chané, Odermatt, Ramopoulos (2014).

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), EU humanitarian aid policy has been often overlooked as a sector of EU development policy.⁷ The historical background of humanitarian aid policy is indeed linked to that of EU development policy,⁸ but it was only in the past two decades that the EU created a separate legal and political framework for humanitarian aid policy (Van Elsuwege, Orbie, and Bossuyt, 2016: 8). This resulted in a solid framework that led also to the affirmation of the autonomy of this policy from EU development policy,⁹ thus making it visible and institutionalized. EU development and EU humanitarian aid are, in fact, two separate kinds of policies and this, for instance, is also confirmed at institutional level with the presence of two separate DGs: DG International Cooperation and Development (DG DEVCO) for development and DG ECHO for humanitarian aid.¹⁰ Thus, this paper sheds light on an aspect of EU foreign policy not yet explored.

Secondly, the paper contributes to the general EU-UN literature, by empirically investigating the coordination of the two organisations in a specific type of humanitarian aid policy, that is, food assistance. This leads to the focus on DG ECHO, of course, and on WFP, the UN agency specialized in this sector. To attain the purpose, I selected two case studies, Ethiopia and Chad, and interviewed officials from both the DG ECHO Headquarters and Country Offices as well as WFP officials based in Brussels and Rome.

Thirdly, the empirical assessment on whether and how DG ECHO and WFP coordinate entails another relevant issue: does the EU have an active role during the policy process? Or is it “just”, as most of the literature supports, a donor, intended as a passive role?

The paper is structured as follows: a first part dedicated to the definition of food assistance policy, to its actors and its tools; a second empirical part entirely dedicated to the case studies and the interviews, where what has been said in theory is put into practice and, finally, the conclusion that will open to further investigation.

⁷ Remarkable exceptions on EU humanitarian aid policy (EUHAP) literature have been Van Elsuwege, Orbie and Bossuyt (2016) and Broberg (2014) who have focused on the development and distinctive features of EU humanitarian aid and the nexus between the latter and development aid. Pusterla (2015) has dedicated her research to the aspect of delegation which characterises EUHAP. Versluys (2008) analyses the evolution towards greater independence of humanitarian assistance from EU policy objectives concerning crisis management and development, as well as the emerging trend towards a more pronounced Europeanisation of humanitarian aid policy.

⁸ The first reference to humanitarian aid was in article 20 of the Yaoundé Convention of 1969, which mentions “exceptional aid”, that is emergency aid to governments of the AASM countries. Also, the Lomé Convention expanded its scope and “exceptional aid” was replaced by “emergency aid”: not only could economic or natural emergencies be addressed, but also civil wars and ethnic conflicts. In 1971, the European Parliament created a budgetary fund only dedicated to humanitarian aid.

⁹ On EU development policy see works by Lister (1998), by Arts and Dickson (2004) and by Carbone (2007, 2008).

¹⁰ On the difference between the two see Dany (2015) and Van Elsuwege, Orbie, and Bossuyt, 2016.

COORDINATION IN FOOD ASSISTANCE POLICY: AN EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS

EU food assistance policy: concepts, actors, tools

One of the main tools of humanitarian aid policy is food aid, better known today as *food assistance*. On this topic, a pretty extensive literature can be found when referring to UN food assistance (i.e. Shaw, Stokke). On the contrary, not much has been written specifically on EU food assistance. The scholarly literature on EU food assistance typically has focused on the birth and evolution of DG ECHO, whose task, since the beginning, has been to provide emergency assistance, on the basis of need, to the victims of natural or man-made disasters (Bretherton and Vogler, 2006: 130). However, exceptions include Cathie (1997); Belfrage (2007), when writing about food aid and its consequences, and Walker, Hodges, Wandschneider (2007) when focusing on food aid procurement and Ethiopia.

The development of EU food aid policy is intertwined with the history of US food aid and the establishment of the Food Agriculture Organisation (FAO) in 1945 and of the WFP in 1963.¹¹ Thus, the partnership between the EU and WFP has existed since the beginning of the 1960s and, throughout the years, both organisations broadened their scope. Today, we talk about food assistance rather than food aid, as the latter refers to international transfers of food for which recipients pay nothing or at least considerably less than world market prices (Belfrage, 2007: 163). Food assistance encompasses food aid as an instrument, together with cash transfers and vouchers.¹² It refers to a set of interventions designed to provide vulnerable and food insecure populations with access to food (Omamo, Gentilini, Sandström, 2010: 4).

Since there are many factors accounting for food insecurity and malnutrition, food assistance has gained importance. Globalisation and climate change, together with other factors such as weak governance, social inequality, food price crises, global economic crisis all contribute to lack of food and, thus, severe hunger which affects the poorest. And it is precisely hunger and malnutrition that both WFP and the EU want to tackle through their food assistance policies. WFP has the objective to avert starvation in humanitarian crises through food assistance and break the hunger-poverty cycle (Omamo, Gentilini, Sandström, 2010: 2). Similarly, the objectives of EU food assistance are:

1. To safeguard the availability of, access to and consumption of adequate, safe and nutritious food for populations affected by ongoing or recent humanitarian crises.
2. To protect livelihoods threatened by recent, ongoing crises; to minimise damage to food production and marketing systems and establish conditions to promote rehabilitation.

¹¹ To know more about the history of the development of FAO and WFP and EU food aid programme see Shaw (2011) and Cathie (1997).

¹² Cash transfers are sums of money provided to beneficiaries; sums that depend on the objective of the transfer. Vouchers are used to provide access to a range of commodities, for a predefined value or quantity, at recognized retail outlets or service centres.

3. To strengthen the capacities of international humanitarian aid system, to enhance efficiency and effectiveness in the delivery of food assistance (ECHO, 2013:5).

Thus, through food assistance the EU intervenes when it assesses, for instance, that there is an inadequate food consumption, so to ensure food availability; when there is an emergency rate of mortality, so to ensure access to nutritious food; when there is food acute malnutrition, so as to deliver proper nutrition awareness and proper feeding practice; and when compromised livelihoods pose a severe threat of life, leading to inadequate food consumption.¹³

When talking about DG ECHO field network we have to bear in mind that it is organised in:

- Country Offices (CO), composed by national staff and humanitarian experts and represent DG ECHO in the countries where projects are implemented.
- Sub-country Offices, administratively dependent on Country Offices, are present in very large countries, where humanitarian actions are necessary in a specific area.
- Antennas, small temporary offices that conduct project assessment, monitoring, provides logistical and administrative support when it is necessary.
- Regional Offices (RO), which deal with several countries in the same region providing technical operational expertise and coordination (ECHO, 2016).

These various offices keep headquarters (HQs) up to date in Brussels about the local humanitarian situation; they provide technical advice, needs assessment, and project-monitoring; they contribute to policy development and ensure a coherent implementation of the policy guidelines; and they represent DG ECHO in relevant humanitarian aid clusters/forums. The work usually is in the hand of DG ECHO humanitarian experts, called “Technical Assistants” (TAs), who identify and evaluate humanitarian needs, supervise funded operations and give administrative and logistical support and communication.

When responding to humanitarian crises,¹⁴ it is important to note that DG ECHO supports food assistance activities but does not directly implement them. In fact, the operational aspects of the projects are delegated to others. But we do not have to think of DG ECHO as “just a bank”. Since 1997, ECHO’s strategy has been to present itself as the central actor in humanitarian aid, thus outdoing the simple role of a donor (Mowjee, 2005: 124). We are going to discuss this point further on, since it is connected to understanding whether DG ECHO influences the shaping and implementation of projects. What is interesting now to look at are the “others” mentioned earlier. DG ECHO works with 220 partners:

¹³ See DG ECHO Thematic Policy Document n. 1. Humanitarian Food Assistance. From Food Aid to Food Assistance.

¹⁴ Other activities supported by the Commission are the distribution of agricultural inputs, training, emergency destocking or restocking; the provision of food preparation and food storage materials; training and awareness building on nutrition and feeding practices; therapeutic feeding. See DG ECHO Thematic Policy Document n. 1. Humanitarian Food Assistance. From Food Aid to Food Assistance.

- 197 NGOs;
- International Organisations (such as the Red Cross);
- UN Agencies (mainly WFP);
- Specialized agencies of Member States.

WFP and NGOs are the main “beneficiaries” for food assistance¹⁵. As early as 1997, the EU’s Court of Auditors identified that the majority of food assistance donations were given to WFP and NGOs.¹⁶

Therefore, it is important to look at the coordination between these partners. By verifying if this coordination is effective and whether or not DG ECHO influences the decision-making process and implementation, we can better understand the effectiveness of EU food assistance policy. It also makes us aware of the active role that the EU has in this sector.

The case studies: the framework of the coordination between DG ECHO and WFP

Reading official documentation, it seems that DG ECHO and WFP really do coordinate. In April 2014, WFP published “Guidance for WFP country offices on attaining and managing EC contributions”.¹⁷ It describes how WFP country offices should work with DG ECHO, in the project proposal stage, in the implementation and in the reporting stage. Thus, it describes how WFP should negotiate with DG ECHO, how it should prepare projects proposals that need to be submitted to the ECHO, who should be informed once the implementation phase starts. DG ECHO as well confirms, in its official documents and websites,¹⁸ this partnership and coordination.

¹⁵ NGOs range from highly professional organisations such as businesses requiring managerial skills, to more “simple” and less developed type of organisation. Their activities are divided into three areas: campaigning, fund raising, lobbying; logistics and evaluation of operations; actual operations and projects (Cathie, 1997: 92). They play an important role in EU food assistance: they provide effective lobbying in Brussels, but, especially, they provide organisational and project capacities for relief and humanitarian activities, where national governments, international agencies and the EU are not able to do so (Cathie, 1997: 93, 95). Both DG ECHO and WFP officials highlighted their importance both in the formulation of projects and implementation. “In all countries, coordination meetings happen between our Technical Assistants and WFP with the presence of NGOs. NGOs always participate to these periodical meetings” (ECHO, interview, 2017). WFP (Interview, 2017) stressed the role of NGOs, since they are very important during the implementation of the projects.

¹⁶ Since 1992, the budget, through which the ECHO provides funding to its partners, has progressively grown. Now, the Multi-annual Financial Framework (MFF) set from 2014 until 2020 has provided an annual budget of 1 billion euro. To this initial budget, it should be added the EU Emergency Aid Reserve, used to respond to unforeseen events or crises. 15 % of the total budget is devoted to the so-called “forgotten crises”, that is those crises forgotten by media, but still affecting populations (i.e. crisis in Darfur, Sahrawi refugees in Algeria, the Rohingya people in Myanmar/Burma). Further information can be found at http://ec.europa.eu/echo/funding-evaluations/funding-humanitarian-aid_en and at Budget for Humanitarian Aid in 2016 on the ECHO website (http://ec.europa.eu/echo/funding-evaluations/funding-humanitarian-aid_en).

¹⁷ Document provided by WFP officer.

¹⁸ There is an online permanent portal made expressly for DG ECHO’s UN Partners, in order to provide easy and user-friendly coverage of the rules and procedures in place: <http://eu-unfafa.dgecho-partners-helpdesk.eu>.

Their coordination is defined by the Financial Administrative Framework Agreement (FAFA)¹⁹ which constitutes the legal basis of this coordination and of the general agreements between European Commission and UN. It is an agreement initially signed in 2003, redefined and updated, most recently in 2014. The FAFA sets the principles of cooperation with UN agencies and concerns the implementation of humanitarian aid actions. It clearly sets the procedures to follow before and during the implementation of projects. For example, that UN submissions of proposals for which EU contributes must include objectives and indicators of achievement. Also, that Commission representatives shall be invited to participate in the main monitoring and evaluation missions relating to the performance of actions funded by the Commission. The Commission's evaluation should be planned and completed in cooperation with UN staff. Furthermore, the FAFA agreement is important as it affirms that there should be agreement between the Commission and the UN, when, for example, setting the appropriate procurement rules and procedures. Of course, there are also all the financial aspects and costs that need to find the agreement of both organisations.

In addition to the FAFA, the Worldwide Decision and the Humanitarian Implementation Plans (HIPs) constitute the framework of the coordination between WFP and DG ECHO. Since 2012, every year, DG ECHO sets an initial budget which is adopted through a 'Worldwide Decision', which covers all humanitarian aid actions that will be funded by the Commission. From the Worldwide Decision stems the provision of the allocation of funding for the ECHO Country Offices. The HIPs are financing decisions that take the form of legal acts adopted by the Commission in order to authorise DG ECHO to spend from the EU budget and fund humanitarian actions.²⁰ These decisions are taken on the basis of needs assessment and set different needs priorities, funding allocations and development. Needs assessment is conducted following two distinct phases. In the first phase an Index for Risk Management is used, based on national data. It allows the comparison between countries and it identifies the level of humanitarian risk. There is also the Forgotten Crisis Assessment (FCA), another tool to identify the above mentioned "forgotten crises". In the second phase an in-depth assessment is conducted by humanitarian experts, the so-called Integrated Analysis Framework (IAF).²¹

In general, EU food assistance needs assessment focuses on the situational context (socio-political and operational dimensions), routine information on food security derived from systematic monitoring, perspective on the emergency based on humanitarian food and nutrition data.²²

This is the general background that officially frames the coordination between DG ECHO and WFP. To go more into depth in understanding the effectiveness of this coordination, I have

¹⁹ Available at http://eu-unfafa.dgecho-partners-helpdesk.eu/_media/fafa_2014.pdf

²⁰ ECHO website (http://ec.europa.eu/echo/funding-evaluations/funding-decisions-hips_en) and ECHO interview, 2017.

²¹ ECHO website (http://ec.europa.eu/echo/what/humanitarian-aid/needs-assessments_en).

²² See DG ECHO Thematic Policy Document n. 1. Humanitarian Food Assistance. From Food Aid to Food Assistance.

selected two case studies, Ethiopia and Chad, countries where both DG ECHO and WFP have country offices and operate. The criteria at the basis of this choice are financial and geographical. In fact, based on the 2016 Commission's contributions to WFP, the projects that received the highest EU financing were in Ethiopia. During that year, WFP in Ethiopia received from the Commission a total of \$121,903,024. In particular, \$92,190,889 was given to "Responding to Humanitarian Crises and Enhancing Resilience to Food Insecurity". In contrast, WFP in Chad received less from the Commission, a total contribution of \$19,512,867. Of the latter amount, \$16,719,571 was addressed to "Building Resilience, Protecting Livelihoods and Reducing Malnutrition of Refugees, Returnees and other Vulnerable People".²³ Nevertheless, Chad belongs to the Sahel region, where WFP and DG ECHO tend to mainly send their aid.

Ethiopia has always been the largest recipient of food assistance in Africa. In fact, it has a population of almost 100 million people and it is commonly believed that the country cannot grow enough food to feed its population and mainly relies on external in-kind donations (Walker, Hodges, Wandschneider, 2007: 89). Furthermore, in 2015/2016 Ethiopia was severely affected by El Niño. The lack of rain in 2015 and the El Niño induced drought in 2016 significantly weakened the population. Also, many regions have been affected by serious flooding during the rainy season (June-September) due to rains of unprecedented abundance and strength. However, some areas did not receive sufficient rainfall, and some people still do not have access to sufficient water.²⁴ 9.7 million individuals needed food assistance, 2.5 million were moderately malnourished and 458 000 severely malnourished.²⁵

In this context, since 2015, WFP has been implementing a project on "Responding to Humanitarian Crises and Enhancing Resilience to Food Insecurity". Through it, WFP addresses acute food insecurity, aggravated by the drought. The objectives "are to transition chronically food insecure households to a predictable safety net; to provide emergency food assistance for vulnerable households and to address malnutrition through a combination of preventative and curative approaches. The project supports and complements the Government's social protection, disaster risk management and nutrition programmes" (WFP, 2017).

Chad belongs to the Sahel, one of the regions with the highest acute under-nutrition rates in the world. Like Ethiopia, Chad has also been severely affected by El Niño and, in addition, was also hit by the 2012 Sahel food and nutrition crisis, during which DG ECHO intervened together with WFP.²⁶ In general, it has always been a country characterised by structural poverty with limited access to water, healthcare, inadequate nutrition and vaccination. Food insecurity is one of the major problems in the country, causing severe malnutrition: eleven

²³ Data available at <http://www.wfp.org/about/funding/governments/european-commission?year=2016>

²⁴ See OCHA website.

http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/ethiopia_drought_response_situation_report_no._04_a_s_of_31_august_2016_0.pdf

²⁵ *Ibidem.*

²⁶ See ECHO website

http://ec.europa.eu/echo/files/aid/countries/ECHO_2012_Response_Sahel_Crisis_en.pdf

regions out of twenty surpass the threshold of “severe acute malnutrition” (ECHO, 2017). DG ECHO and WFP have been intervening in the country, the DG also financing NGOs, such as ALIMA (Alliance for International Medical Action). The WFP project “Building Resilience, Protecting Livelihoods and Reducing Malnutrition of Refugees, Returnees and other Vulnerable People”, financed by DG ECHO, started in 2015 and ended December 2016. It had the objective to enhance the capacity of vulnerable populations to quickly respond to shocks through a system of voucher-based transfers and local purchase of food, so to support the development and integration of local markets (WFP, 2014). The project was mainly based on rations of cereals, pulses, enriched vegetable oil, salt, sugar. Also, vouchers have been distributed with a value of \$11.25 per person per month.

This is an overall background, with a very brief context on the case studies, in which the coordination between DG ECHO and WFP takes place, as the empirical analysis seems to show. But to understand if this coordination is effective and whether the EU has an active role we cannot just rely on books or official documents. It is useful to try to seize a perspective from the inside from both sides. That is the reason why a set of interviews were conducted with officials from both DG ECHO and WFP. To try to make the vision more comprehensive, the interviews were conducted with officials in Headquarters (in Rome for WFP; in Brussels for DG ECHO) and in COs and desk offices (Brussels for WFP; desk office for Ethiopia and CO in Chad for DG ECHO). To answer the research questions, we must look at specific aspects that usually concern daily work. When looking at the shaping and implementation of policies, administrative and bureaucratic aspects become revealing. The answers to some of these questions can be found on official documents of course, such as “who works on the projects”, “how long do the projects last”. DG ECHO, for instance, deals with emergencies and, thus, its activities cannot last longer than eighteen months (also confirmed by ECHO interview 2017). However, the question remains whether what is written on paper is confirmed in practice. Thus, the next section will show the main findings coming from the interviews.

The case studies: empirical assessment of the coordination

One interesting outcome of the interviews is that there are many common points and opinions between officials from WFP and from DG ECHO. Both, for example, affirmed the importance of the partnership. WFP is one of the major partners of DG ECHO and, even if it also cooperates with DG DEVCO and DG Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations (DG NEAR), WFP officials affirmed that their “privileged interlocutor” is DG ECHO (ECHO, WFP interviews, 2017). In the following paragraphs, I illustrate the process carried out for the shaping and implementation of projects for food assistance policies, from which the effectiveness of coordination can be deduced. This process was the same and applied in both Ethiopia and in Chad.

We have seen that the framework to the coordination between DG ECHO and WFP is the FAFA agreement, the Worldwide Decision and the HIPs, through which DG ECHO sets its priorities that change according to the needs of the different regions. This is the context where

partners propose projects to DG ECHO. In fact, it is up to WFP to formulate project proposals taking into account the priorities set out by DG ECHO, through HIPs, and ask for financing. WFP intervenes and starts all the process of the formulation of food assistance projects only when it receives the request and the agreement by the local governments, while DG ECHO does not have any relationship with the national institutions (ECHO, WFP, interview, 2017). Thus, everything starts from WFP COs which, based on strategic guidelines, start to elaborate a project proposal so to obtain financing from DG ECHO. Before arriving in Brussels, these proposals usually undergo an internal system of clearance and long-term projects usually have to wait for the approval of WFP Executive Board.

Project proposals, such as the ones previously mentioned in Ethiopia and Chad,²⁷ are first discussed with the ECHO experts on the field. In fact, one of the peculiarities of DG ECHO, also compared to DG DEVCO and DG NEAR (which operate through delegations that entertain official relations with the States), is that it has a large network of people (450 in total) who work in the field: 1/3 are European technical experts (the above-mentioned Technical Assistants), and 2/3 local agents (who can be both local experts or support, i.e. drivers). Once WFP CO experts have started to discuss the project proposal with DG ECHO experts in the field, and after having passed the internal process of clearance, the project proposal is sent to Brussels. There, it is analysed by DG ECHO desk offices, responsible for the country. At this point it starts a sort of “ping-pong” between WFP and DG ECHO: it is rare that the project proposal is accepted as it is sent. These exchanges mainly consist of comments, requests for further clarifications, requests for changes and, for example, modification of criteria and/or targets. In fact, it may be that the goals proposed are unrealistic and need adjustment and it could also happen that there has been a too high request for funds (ECHO, interview, 2017). These exchanges are done electronically: through a series of tools (notably the so-called *fiches opérationnelles*) that allow immediate online exchange between the two partners. Finally, both partners reach an agreement on the final project proposal that will be financed. Not every project gets financing: there is, in fact, competition between the different projects, especially due to budget restrictions. It is important to bear in mind that WFP coordinates with many donors, not just DG ECHO. As a matter of fact, not all WFP projects are financed by the DG.

We have seen how coordination, on the side of DG ECHO, takes place in close coordination with WFP COs or ROs. It is up to the ECHO desk office to negotiate the financing proposal with the appropriate “level” of office (that is CO or RO), both of DG ECHO and of WFP: their role is important as they make sure that the project is consistent with the general framework of operations in that specific region. In fact, experts, when formulating projects and operations, should consider what it has been done in other countries so as to make sure there is not too much of a difference between regions. Furthermore, an Annual Strategic Dialogue is held between WFP and DG ECHO. Here the two organisations meet and discuss policies and strategies to implement, and set the operational priorities for the current and following year.

²⁷ See previous section.

The job of Technical Assistants is not solely confined to the moment of the elaboration of the financial proposal and of the project. An important task is that of monitoring the implementation of those projects that the ECHO chooses to finance. DG ECHO organizes regular meetings and regular contact is kept with partners and experts on the field (ECHO, interview, 2017). Coordination, thus, happens also this way: through regular contacts that could be both formal and informal. WFP officers keep in regular touch with desk offices of ECHO in Brussels. It is significant to also know that, especially at senior managerial level, officers of WFP and DG ECHO know each other and that a good coordination is also kept with those who work in the field.

To understand if projects are “good”, that is if they are correctly implemented and if they achieve the targets, both WFP and DG ECHO hire external evaluators both for programs and projects. In addition, the ECHO desk offices keep a constant dialogue with partners and ensure that the goals set at the beginning, in the proposal, are actually met. Desk officers evaluate the projects: their evaluation takes the form of reports, which are drafted both during the implementation of the project and at the end (ECHO, interview, 2017). If the report is positive and the project is judged to be of high quality, DG ECHO finances it entirely: if the project does not meet the targets previously established, there are a set of legal instruments used to reduce financing, which, until now, has never been the case. Indeed, projects have always been judged to be above sufficiency. As mentioned at the beginning, the process of coordination just described is applied to every country: also in Chad and Ethiopia as it was confirmed by all WFP and DG ECHO interviewees.

When asked if there have been problems in this coordination process, both WFP and DG ECHO officials affirmed that, “Coordination between us is good, since there are all the structures that make it possible” (ECHO, WFP interview 2017), that is all the meetings, including the Annual Strategic Dialogue, the exchanges through emails, telephone, online tools, are done on a regular basis. One Ethiopia desk official (Interview, 2017) said:

WFP has a longstanding working relationship with DG ECHO and is considered the (only) partner with the capacities to deal with an enormous response such as last year in response to the effects of El Niño which is shown by the significant amount of EUR102 million provided to WFP out of the total amount of EUR 168.3 million for Ethiopia. [...] The funded WFP actions are multi-donor actions. In this light, the DG ECHO office has continuous discussions with WFP on operational issues, policies and their interlinkages considering the Ethiopian context, for instance, on the effectiveness of the WFP actions and in particular on the use of cash.²⁸

²⁸ DG ECHO in Ethiopia is currently finalising the contracting with WFP for 2017 for a significant smaller amount as this year's funding for Ethiopia is significant smaller (EUR 56.5) than last year. It will include emergency response, refugee response and support to the UNHAS flight (ECHO, interview, 2017).

The ECHO Regional Food Assistance expert of Central Africa, also, confirmed that:

dialogue with WFP takes place at several levels and throughout the project cycle, both at the operational and strategic levels. We also carry out monitoring visits (at least once per project) that allow us to make recommendations and debrief with the partner: for operational aspects, this takes place both in the field and at HQs level; for strategic aspects, it will take place at the level of the regional office. [...] I believe that DG ECHO is one of the few donors to provide technical expertise in order to allow the enhancement of the answers by its partners through a constant dialogue with them [...] DG ECHO CO staff has a regular and permanent contact with WFP offices.

More specifically for Chad, referring to the above-mentioned project "Building Resilience, Protecting Livelihoods and Reducing Malnutrition of Refugees, Returnees and other Vulnerable People", the Head of the ECHO office in Chad added that:

DG ECHO systematically monitors the funded projects and WFP is one of our main partners in the implementation of the ECHO strategy for the management and prevention of severe acute malnutrition. There are therefore very regular contacts (business meetings) between the ECHO office and WFP Chad, field visits and informal meetings, with the aim of exchanging information on the implementation of the strategy, on the needs assessment and on the difficulties encountered (ECHO, interview, 2017).

Furthermore, on the side of WFP, confirmation of the coordination between the two not only came from the office in Brussels, but also from WFP HQ in Rome: "DG ECHO-WFP exchange is done on a daily basis at different levels" (WFP, interview, 2017).

On the basis of all the interviews conducted, coordination between DG ECHO and WFP seems to be effective thanks to the structures put into place. Indeed, if we look at the various definitions of coordination, the relationship between DG ECHO and WFP reflects what Boutrous-Ghali had already singled out as the main features of effective coordination.²⁹ Accordingly, coordination is characterised by:

- A clear allocation of responsibilities: we have seen the clear internal division of DG ECHO, the fact that it has desk offices, a vast network of COs and ROs in the field. The same is valid for WFP.
- An effective division of labour: WFP initially formulates the project proposal, field experts from DG ECHO provide WFP with inputs; then at the HQ the project is finally accepted. During the implementation process by WFP, DG ECHO Technical Assistants monitor the situation and keep the ECHO HQs updated on the project.

²⁹ See Introduction.

- Commitment by those who work: the regular exchanges with WFP, but also the regular contact kept internally between Technical Assistants in the field and the ECHO HQs is a proof of the commitment of the people involved. Furthermore, the evaluation reports drafted both by external evaluator and DG ECHO desk offices are means to verify and, thus, ensure that the goals are met and the priorities respected.

In addition, let's recall another peculiarity that usually goes unnoticed. WFP has its office in Brussels, a nine-minute walk from the offices of DG ECHO. This "physical" aspect can be seen as another element supporting the idea of the close and effective coordination between the two organisations.

The empirical assessment of coordination led us to wonder whether the EU plays an active role during the policy process. Is it "just", as most of the literature supports, a donor, which implies a passive role? As previously mentioned, the academic literature has traditionally defined DG ECHO essentially as a bank. When interviewees firstly answered this question, both DG ECHO and WFP officials replied that "yes, ECHO is mainly a donor to WFP projects" (ECHO, WFP interview, 2017). Nevertheless, the interviews indirectly indicated that the scope of DG ECHO was more extensive than just that of a donor focused on financing projects. If the EU, and DG ECHO in our case, are defined as "banks" we consider them as having a passive role towards the shaping and implementation of food assistance's policies and projects. DG ECHO is there just to give financing and to enable other organisations to implement overall food assistance policy. If that was the case, that is if DG ECHO was passive and just gave funds, then all the procedures put into place in these years to ensure coordination with the partners, in particular with WFP, would have not been useful. All the structural elements, such as regular meetings, the existence of COs and ROs, the network on the field, the overall procedure of the project proposal, including the sort of "ping-pong" between the two, are there for a purpose and this means that the EU is not just a donor.

Indeed, when talking with the interviewees what emerged is that DG ECHO, at least indirectly, shapes the formulation and implementation of the projects. This is done in a number of ways:

1. At the beginning, through the HIPs. By setting their priorities DG ECHO already influences the operations: WFP, for example, will propose projects that are consistent with what is established in the HIPs.
2. During the formulation of the projects. Technical Assistants on the field already intervene giving their suggestions and their inputs to WFP's experts, who are formulating the project that, once internally approved, will be sent to Brussels.
3. During the final shaping of the project. As previously shown, there is a continuous exchange between DG ECHO and WFP through electronical tools. DG ECHO provides WFP with comments, proposal of changes that should be done to make the project proposal acceptable to receiving financing. Thus, comments on the strategies, on the targets, on the amount of financing requested, influence the shaping of the project.

4. During the implementation stage of projects. It is true that the actual implementation is done by WFP and NGOs, but DG ECHO Technical Assistants indirectly influence this implementation by monitoring and regularly reporting to the ECHO HQs. Although never used, DG ECHO could also make use of the legal instrument that cuts funding if it is proven that the implementation of the projects is not reaching the pre-set goals.
5. In the end, with the evaluation reports. DG ECHO desk offices write evaluation reports documenting the operation, what has been done, if targets were met or not. The evaluation reports may have an influence in the long term: if there had been some problems, for example, in that particular year, for a certain kind of operation, this will not be repeated in the future. Thus, during the phase of the shaping of the food assistance policy and projects, ECHO will make sure that past mistakes will not be repeated.

For these reasons, we should think of DG ECHO as, of course, a donor, but we should at least add the adjective “active” or “influencer”. Another question then arises, which is if the EU has an interest in giving some donations to specific projects in specific countries. Although intriguing, this is not the place to discuss it and it can be the topic of another paper thesis due to the need to conduct further in-depth analysis, possibly on the field.

In conclusion, I have tried to go beyond what official documentation reports, in order to reply to the initial questions. On paper, in fact, DG ECHO and WFP coordinate. I looked to “reality” and to the opinions of the people working from within, taking the example of two countries where DG ECHO and WFP are currently engaged. It seems that coordination is truly effective, supported by a series of structural elements that allows it to be so. Furthermore, we had a clearer idea on the role of the EU, through DG ECHO, in this context. DG ECHO is more than just a simple donor, often intended as a passive role. It is an “active donor”: it is present during the formulation, the shaping and the implementation of policies both in the HQs in Brussels and in the field. Indeed, of remarkable importance is the role held by field offices since they allow DG ECHO to be “active”: they indirectly, and sometimes, directly influence the entire process, from the formulation to the implementation of food assistance projects.

CONCLUSION

This paper sought to answer the question whether and how the EU (through DG ECHO) and the UN (through WFP) coordinate when shaping and implementing food assistance policy. Stemming from this main issue, another question arose, that is whether or not the EU plays an active role, participating in the formulation of food assistance projects and is not just a “simple” donor.

Bearing in mind the definition of the terms (coordination, cooperation, collaboration) mentioned in the introduction and taking into consideration the definition of coordination by Boutros-Ghali, the *first main empirical finding* of the paper is that DG ECHO-WFP

coordination is present and effective since it features a clear allocation of responsibilities, an effective division of labour and commitment to the projects by those who work. These features are not only written on paper, but they are, most importantly, applied. In fact, we have empirically verified that there is a clear division of responsibilities, both within the two organisations and between them during the policy cycle. There is, also, an effective division of labour: WFP starts the process by formulating project proposals, which receive inputs by DG ECHO Technical Assistants in the field, and are then sent to ECHO HQs. During the implementation by WFP, the monitoring and evaluation phase is done both by WFP, but especially by DG ECHO Country Offices which keep the HQs updated. Finally, regular exchanges with WFP, but also the regular contact internally between Technical Assistants in the field and the ECHO HQs, are proof of the commitment to coordinate by the people involved. Furthermore, the evaluation reports drafted both by external evaluator and DG ECHO desk offices are means to verify and, thus, ensure that the goals are met and the priorities respected.

The assessment of the effectiveness of the DG ECHO-WFP coordination has resulted in a *second main empirical finding* concerning the role of the EU in the international arena and in the humanitarian aid context. Current scholarly literature defines DG ECHO as mainly a donor. This concept is usually associated with a passive role in that donors do not really participate in the policy process. On the contrary, what emerged from the interviews and the empirical assessment is that DG ECHO participates during the formulation, shaping and implementation of the projects, and policies, both in the HQs in Brussels and through its Country and Regional Offices. As suggested above, through the analysis of the passages of the policy making process, the EU should be, at least, defined as an “active” or an “influencer” donor.

In conclusion, the study on coordination may be an element of a more comprehensive and extensive question seeking not to solely look at the existence of coordination, but at the effectiveness of the projects that are implemented through this coordination. The coordination between EU and IOs can just be a *condition* that may contribute to the effectiveness of the humanitarian aid projects, so not only food assistance but a whole other range of humanitarian aid sectors of vital importance for many people victims of natural or man-made crises and disasters. Indeed, as we know, EU humanitarian food assistance is a way to strengthen the livelihoods of affected population, but it may not be sufficient. In fact, adequate food consumption does not ensure adequate nutrition. Thus, a more extensive study can and should be conducted, focusing on the effectiveness of EU humanitarian aid policy in general.

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