

Confronting Common Challenges: A Transatlantic Partnership for Improving Humanitarian Assistance?

Conference Report

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Background

On 27 April 2009, MEP Erika Mann together with the Global Public Policy Institute (GPPi) held a roundtable discussion entitled “Confronting Common Challenges: A Transatlantic Partnership for Improving Humanitarian Assistance?” The discussion brought together 25 participants from key EU institutions, the U.S. Mission to the EU, NGOs and research institutions to discuss the potential for increased cooperation between the EU and the U.S. in the field of humanitarian assistance.

Different approaches towards humanitarian assistance

During the roundtable discussion, speakers and participants addressed European and U.S. approaches towards humanitarian assistance and noted important differences. The U.S. Government was acknowledged to have a more political approach than the European Commission, since the Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA) works within the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), which in turn is linked to the State Department. Moreover, other U.S. Government agencies, including the Department of Defense, the Department of Agriculture and the Department of State are involved in the provision of humanitarian assistance. Participants expressed the desire for the U.S. to separate development and humanitarian issues more clearly to ensure the independence of humanitarian activities. In addition, participants noted a greater centralization of humanitarian assistance in the U.S., where the Federal Government bears responsibility for this area. In the EU, by contrast, the European Commission’s Humanitarian Aid department (ECHO), enjoys considerable autonomy, but has to reflect demands of 27 different member states.

Participants described an enhanced focus on and progress within humanitarian assistance in Europe over recent years. A set of minimum standards, rules and principles for humanitarian assistance, the European Consensus on Humanitarian Aid, was developed and adopted only recently in the EU. The Consensus includes the humanitarian principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence and demands adherence to them. Participants felt that the U.S. espoused a less principled approach to humanitarian assistance and urged the American Government to respect the principles and support efforts to protect the humanitarian space.

Benefits of enhanced transatlantic cooperation

Despite the diverging approaches, both the U.S. and EU emphasized their strong interest in enhancing cooperation in development, as well as humanitarian assistance. In this respect, it was noted that cooperation and coordination already take place. The annual strategic policy dialogue between the U.S. Government and ECHO, monthly coordination calls and the recent joint mission to eastern Chad were mentioned as examples of existing cooperation. Participants stated that enhanced cooperation and coordination would improve the transatlantic relationship in general and would strengthen the effectiveness of humanitarian assistance by avoiding duplication, maximizing operational efficiency and supporting policy coherence. It was pointed out,

however, that plans for enhanced cooperation should not remain on an abstract level, but should reflect field realities, which often are marked by limited capacities and people.

Risks of enhanced transatlantic cooperation

Participants voiced several concerns around enhanced transatlantic cooperation, including perceived western dominance, leading to limited access to regions in crisis, exclusion of emerging donors and an increased politicization of humanitarian affairs.

Discussants disagreed on whether enhanced cooperation carried the risk of sacrificing the principles of neutrality, independence, humanity, and impartiality. Some feared that the EU might compromise its principled stance on humanitarian assistance by working more closely with the U.S., whose commitment to the humanitarian principles is less strict. Others, however, felt that a false dichotomy between principles and pragmatism was created. According to their view, the humanitarian principles are indispensable to execute humanitarian assistance pragmatically. Therefore, participants proposed a high-level discussion on the meaning of humanitarian assistance, its principles and how it should be executed. They also felt that the debate should address the question on how to work together closely while being perceived as independent, neutral, and impartial.

Ways to strengthen transatlantic cooperation

Participants suggested several parallel methods for enhancing transatlantic cooperation while. Firstly, this included ways to strengthen informal collaboration, which was said to be less exclusive, but very effective at creating mutual learning. Secondly, participants emphasized that existing multilateral structures should be utilized more strongly to facilitate cooperation. Finally, participants recommended high-level bilateral channels for addressing controversial political issues.

More specifically, participants stressed the importance of top-level support for enhanced cooperation and greater transparency to spur informal cooperation, the exchange of ideas and lessons learned. It remained unresolved, however, how to exactly achieve greater transparency. Others noted that existing informal initiatives, such as the development of a code of conduct for U.S. civil-military relations issued by USAID in collaboration with InterAction marked steps in the right direction and might serve as a model for other informal collaborations. Participants suggested that the transatlantic partners should continue to discuss under which circumstances the military can play a beneficial role in disaster relief activities (provision of military assets as a last resort, following the Oslo Guidelines on the Use of Foreign Military and Civil Defense Assets in Disaster relief).

Addressing political controversies

Participants urged the EU and the U.S. to openly address their policy discrepancies relating to humanitarian assistance. The debate often returned to the issue of food aid. The question of whether food aid should be granted only in cases of severe emergencies, or whether it should be an integrated part of development assistance was said to require

further discussion. In this respect, participants heavily criticized the U.S. approach of donating U.S. food commodities to poor countries, as it was said to reflect mainly domestic farmers' interest.

Participants mentioned refugee settlement as an area better handled by the U.S. than the EU. Here, talks on issues related to refugee settlement could be enhanced through an in-depth exchange of experiences.

How to reform the humanitarian system

Finally, a general discussion on the best way to induce change within humanitarian assistance ensued. For some of the participants, policy statements were viewed as a second step following action on the ground, meaning that operational and technical work should precede policy issues. This approach was disputed by others who suggested top level policy as essential before action. This issue remained unresolved and participants agreed that this discussion should remain an area for further debate.

The "Raising the Bar" Project is generously supported by



Additional financial support is provided by

