



Council of the  
European Union

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COHAFA 1  
ALIM 1  
DEVGEN 1  
CSDP/PSDC 3  
ACP 1  
FIN 8  
PROCIV 1  
COJUR 1  
CONUN 6  
COHOM 1  
MIGR 1  
COAFR 7  
MAMA 4  
RELEX 5

**NOTE**

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From: General Secretariat of the Council  
To: Delegations

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Subject: Belgian Presidency of the Council of the EU  
Work Programme  
Working Party on Humanitarian Aid and Food Aid (COHAFA)  
1 January – 30 June 2024

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On behalf of the Presidency, delegations will find in annex the work programme of the Belgian Presidency for the Working Party on Humanitarian Aid and Food Aid (COHAFA) from 1 January to 30 June 2024.

BELGIAN PRESIDENCY OF THE COUNCIL OF THE EU

WORK PROGRAMME

WORKING PARTY ON HUMANITARIAN AID AND FOOD AID (COHAFA)

1 JANUARY – 30 JUNE 2024

1. In this ever-changing world, full of challenges and instability, continuity of humanitarian efforts is key and the EU and its Member States have a crucial role to play. Indeed, 2024, with European elections and the end of another legislative cycle, will mark a turning point.
2. On the humanitarian front, the most vulnerable are facing the consequences of global challenges. As highlighted by the Trio programme and past presidencies, funding is limited and humanitarian needs will continue to reach unprecedented levels, at a time of shrinking humanitarian space, increased and protracted conflict, politicisation of aid and increasing vulnerabilities.
3. Taking into account the European and humanitarian contexts, the Belgian presidency will seek to continue the efforts of the past years, promote a Team Europe approach and look to the future. The third edition of the European Humanitarian Forum, cohosted by the European Commission and Belgium, will also be an opportunity to shed light on the efforts made by the European Union and its Member States to address current humanitarian challenges such as the funding gap and underfunded crises.
4. The Belgian Presidency will take stock of the implementation of the European Commission's Communication on 'The EU's humanitarian action: new challenges, same principles' (2021) and will follow up on the implementation of relevant Council Conclusions.

5. Based on consultations with relevant humanitarian partners and in continuing the Trio programme, the Belgian Presidency will focus on five interlinked priorities, namely the funding gap, protection, underfunded and forgotten crises, localisation and Accountability to Affected People (AAP), and humanitarian space. With the EU and its Member States being important humanitarian donors and Belgium being recognised as a flexible and predictable donor, quality funding will be mainstreamed through these five priorities.

## **I. STRATEGIC PRIORITY THEMES**

### **1. THE HUMANITARIAN FUNDING GAP**

6. With the adoption – in May 2023 – of the Council conclusions on addressing the humanitarian funding gap and the EU common approach on strategic outreach to emerging and potential humanitarian donors, Member States and the European Commission have taken a great step forward by agreeing on measures to mobilise more resources, ensure a more sustainable and balanced sharing of funding, improve aid effectiveness and reduce needs. The focus lies now on the implementation of the conclusions and the EU common approach, taking into account that the projections for the overall humanitarian system for 2024 are uncertain.
7. Indeed, considering the massive increase of people in need of humanitarian assistance, the number of protracted crises and the widening funding gap, some are calling to reflect on the humanitarian aid architecture. Also, in order to encourage more donors to step in and step up, the narrative on addressing the funding gap should be developed in a manner that promotes an understanding of humanitarian aid as a manifestation of global solidarity in the spirit of the UN Charter and an investment that can contribute to fostering long-term stability and resilience.

8. Therefore, taking into account the framework provided by the Council conclusions and the continuous dialogue on the funding gap during COHAFAs meetings, the Belgian Presidency will promote the implementation of the Council conclusions and the EU common approach and look for ways to monitor progress. The Presidency will also seek to deepen discussions on what it means to be a humanitarian donor in today's aid architecture. In this context, the focus will be put on ways for EU donors to address the funding gap, particularly focusing on good practices related to innovative funding approaches (including Anticipatory Action), high-quality funding and flexibility in earmarked funding. Furthermore, the European Humanitarian Forum will also be a great opportunity to engage with a range of actors and to find new ways to broaden and deepen the humanitarian donor base.

## 2. **PROTECTION**

9. Protection plays a central role in humanitarian action and is part of the mandate of several international actors, but remains regularly underfunded due to the difficulty of measuring its outcomes.
10. Taking stock of the 2016 staff working document outlining the definition and objectives of humanitarian protection from the European Commission's perspective, the Global Protection Cluster's efforts and the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) initiatives such as the Principals' statement on the centrality of protection in humanitarian action, the IASC Protection definition (2016) and the IASC Protection Policy review (2022), the Belgian Presidency intends to exchange further on the centrality of protection and how it can be better addressed and more systematically funded by the Commission and the Member States.
11. The Belgian Presidency also aims to explore the possibilities to reach a common understanding on protection at EU level and promote humanitarian diplomacy and initiatives that support prevention and proactive protection, while recognising the importance of protection mainstreaming and the centrality of protection to ensure good programming.

12. Moreover, the Belgian Presidency will highlight the growing problem of digital threats, including misinformation, disinformation and hate speech (MDH), as an increasing factor of risks and vulnerabilities for civilians and humanitarian personnel and operations.
13. Finally, we will keep an eye on the revision of the EU Guidelines on Children and Armed Conflict (CAAC) being undertaken within the COHOM Working Party.

### **3. UNDERFUNDED AND FORGOTTEN CRISES**

14. As annually outlined by DG ECHO's Forgotten crises assessment and the Norwegian Refugee Council's (NRC) report on the most neglected displacement crises, many crises are receiving less attention from the media, from donors' governments, or from the general public. At the same time, other crises create a strong sense of solidarity in Europe and lead to budget reallocations in their direction.
15. The Belgian Presidency believes in the moral imperative to leave no-one behind and to ensure an equitable allocation of funding based on needs. Therefore, at COHAFSA and at the European Humanitarian Forum (EHF), Belgium will seek to raise awareness and mobilise stronger EU support for urgent and long-term responses to underfunded and forgotten crises as well as to promote approaches and ways of ensuring a more equitable distribution of aid such as flexible and predictable funding.
16. While the Belgian Presidency is committed to addressing the worst crises in the world, it will also take advantage of its expertise in certain fragile contexts such as the Great Lakes and the Sahel regions as well as the Occupied Palestinian Territory to address relevant problems occurring in these underfunded and protracted crises.

#### **4. LOCALISATION/ACCOUNTABILITY TO AFFECTED PEOPLE (AAP)**

17. Welcoming DG ECHO guidance note on Promoting Equitable Partnerships with Local Responders in Humanitarian Settings as well as the important commitments made in the Grand Bargain to place beneficiaries and local humanitarian actors at the centre of the humanitarian response, the Belgian Presidency will aim to facilitate innovative discussions and present best practices on Localisation and Accountability to Affected People.
18. In this framework, Belgium intends to address the direct and indirect funding possibilities of local actors and see how they can be improved given the existing barriers. In order to accelerate progress on localisation and help Member States with their localisation commitments, the Belgian Presidency will also engage discussions on overhead costs, compliance including accountability and monitoring of funding to local and national actors, risk sharing and capacity strengthening. The role of intermediaries such as pooled funds will also be addressed to examine how they could conclude more equitable partnerships and ensure that quality funding is cascaded at scale to frontline responders.
19. Finally, on Accountability to Affected People, the focus will be put on how to improve donor responsibility for greater AAP as well as on some best practices, keeping an eye on the development of wider initiatives such as the UN Flagship.

#### **5. HUMANITARIAN SPACE**

20. In a context of shrinking humanitarian space marked by increasing violation of International Humanitarian Law, decreasing humanitarian access, increased insecurity of humanitarian workers and civilians, as well as the consequences of sanctions, principled humanitarian aid and unhindered humanitarian access have never been more at risk than today.

21. The Belgian Presidency would like to raise the attention on the cross-cutting dimension of humanitarian access to reach impactful humanitarian outcomes such as protection or localisation. Although there has always been a tendency to consider humanitarian access as a separate issue, it must be recognised that without access, humanitarian assistance cannot be provided, affected people cannot be reached or protected from harm and, in case of armed conflict, International Humanitarian Law cannot be respected.
22. With this perspective and in keeping with the protection priority, Belgium will ensure continuity with previous presidencies while opening up the floor for new areas of discussions such as humanitarian diplomacy, access negotiations with armed groups, misinformation, disinformation and hate speech and the vicious circle of lack of access and neglect of a crisis.

## **II. WORKING METHODS**

23. To enrich the discussions around some relevant agenda items and priorities, the Belgian Presidency will continue the good practice of inviting speakers and briefers with diverse expertise and from a large spectrum of organisations, where relevant. In the same spirit, the Presidency will consider joint meetings with other Working Parties to encourage reflection and collaboration between areas of expertise - such as fragile contexts, food security and triple nexus with CODEV-PI delegates - and to benefit from other points of view.
24. Depending on humanitarian developments and opportunities that may arise, the Belgian Presidency will also explore the possibility of updating common messages and proposing Council conclusions.
25. Given the unpredictable nature of crises, the Belgian Presidency may amend its programme as necessary; this might include adding discussions on arising and worsening humanitarian crises requiring COHAFA's attention and a Team Europe approach based on discussions among Member States.

26. The Belgian Presidency intends to focus on protection and forgotten crises during the first half of the six-month period and will address the other thematic priorities in the second half. Moreover, in the margins of the last COHAFA meeting under the Belgian Presidency (followed by a closing reception), COHAFA delegates will be invited to a side event to discuss more innovative topics related to the working party's activities.
27. Finally, in order to allow for more in-depth discussions, the Belgian Presidency intends, when relevant, to extend the length of the meeting to a day and a half, starting on the first day in the afternoon and finishing on the second day in the afternoon.

### **III. EUROPEAN HUMANITARIAN FORUM**

28. The third edition of the European Humanitarian Forum, co-hosted by the European Commission and Belgium, will take place in Brussels on 18-19 March 2024. This will serve as the opportunity for the humanitarian community to explore durable and efficient solutions to contemporary humanitarian challenges, through high-level panel discussions based on policy and geographical contexts as well as humanitarian talks. It will also highlight two main themes in line with the above priorities: funding gap and prioritisation, and forgotten crises and fragile humanitarian environments. Tremendous efforts will be made to organise a forum that is as diverse as is possible. Diverse in terms of topics, to provide a relevant platform for the humanitarian community to discuss obstacles and identify solutions. Diverse in terms of background, by bringing together donors, experts, journalists, UN-representatives, and non-governmental partners. And most of all, diverse in terms of participation, with well-balanced representation on panels when it comes to age, gender, geography and participation of local actors.

#### **IV. COHAFA RELEVANT MEETINGS**

- COHAFA MEETING: 10-11 January (including reception on 10/10)
- COHAFA MEETING: 7-8 February
- INFORMAL COHAFA DIRECTORS LEVEL: 22 February
- COHAFA MEETING: 13 and 14 March
- EUROPEAN HUMANITARIAN FORUM: 18-19 March
- COHAFA MEETING: 17-18 April
- COHAFA MEETING: 15-16 May
- INFORMAL COHAFA DELEGATES LEVEL: 28-29 May
- COHAFA MEETING: 19-20 June
- SIDE EVENT and CLOSING RECEPTION: 20 June (PM)

NB: one and half day is foreseen for the COHAFA Meeting (PM- AM- PM).

#### **V. INDICATIVE CALENDAR OF MAIN HUMANITARIAN EVENTS**

##### January

22-27 January: WHO 154th session of the Executive Board (EB)

##### February

2 February: EU - IOM Strategic Cooperation- Tenth Senior Officials Meeting (SOM)

6-9 February: UNICEF Executive board

26 February – 1 March: WFP Executive Board

## March

TBC First week of March : Senior Officials Meeting (SOM) on Syria

18-19 March: European Humanitarian Forum

TBC March: UNHCR Standing Committee

TBC March: 2<sup>nd</sup> EU-ECOWAS Senior Officials Meeting on humanitarian assistance

## April

TBC April: Senior Officials Meeting (SOM) on Ukraine

TBC April: Humanitarian pledging conference on Sahel

30 April: Brussels Syria Conference for the Day of Dialogue in the EP

## May

27 May – 1 June: 77<sup>th</sup> WHO Assembly – WHA

27 May: Brussels Syria Conference (Ministerial pledging session)

## June

TBC June: UNHCR Standing Committee

TBC June: IOM Thirty-fourth Session of the Standing Committee on Programmes and Finance

11-14 June: UNICEF Executive board

19-21 June: ECOSOC Humanitarian Affairs Segment (HAS)

24-28 June: WFP Executive Board

## **VI. BELGIAN COHAFA TEAM**

COHAFA Chair: Pieter Vermaerke

COHAFA Deputy Chair: Laura Cogels

COHAFA Deputy Chair and Belgian delegate to COHAFA: Aude Van Grootenbruel

EU Presidency Officer to COHAFA/co-delegate: Caroline du Bus de Warnaffe

EU Presidency Officer to EHF: Rachel Ledieu

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