

Evaluation of the Belgian strategy for humanitarian aid

How does Belgium meet the needs of people affected by humanitarian crises?



Special Evaluation Office of the Belgian Development Cooperation
Summary - September 2022

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Sarah is one of 3 other siblings raised by their single mom in the Bekaa, Lebanon. Her two brothers had to work to support the family that UNHCR also supports. © UNHCR

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The summary is available in pdf format in English, French and Dutch (the final report is in English) on the website <https://diplomatie.belgium.be/en/policy/special-evaluation-office> or at the Special Evaluation Office.

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Executive Summary

September 2022

The evaluation is conducted by ADE (www.ade.eu), the evaluation team was led by Martine Van de Velde. The Special Evaluation Office ensured that the evaluation complied with the Terms of Reference and benefited from the support of a Reference Group.

The opinions expressed in this document represent the authors' points of view and do not necessarily reflect the position of the FPS Foreign Affairs, Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation.

Introduction

The Special Evaluation Office of the Belgian Development Cooperation commissioned an independent evaluation of the 2014 Belgian Strategy for Humanitarian Assistance to ADE. The purpose of this evaluation is (i) to assess the relevance, coherence and results of this strategy, and (ii) to provide recommendations for improving Belgium's strategic approach towards Humanitarian Assistance.

Scope

The scope of the evaluation included all humanitarian interventions having received funding from the Belgian federal government during the period 2014-2021, through its Directorate-General for Development Cooperation and Humanitarian Aid (DGD). Belgium has used four funding instruments for the roll out of the Belgian strategy – core funding, flexible funding, programmes, and projects. While part of the analysis covers all four of the used instruments for the roll out of the strategy, the main focus for this evaluation has been on the programmes and projects funding instruments.

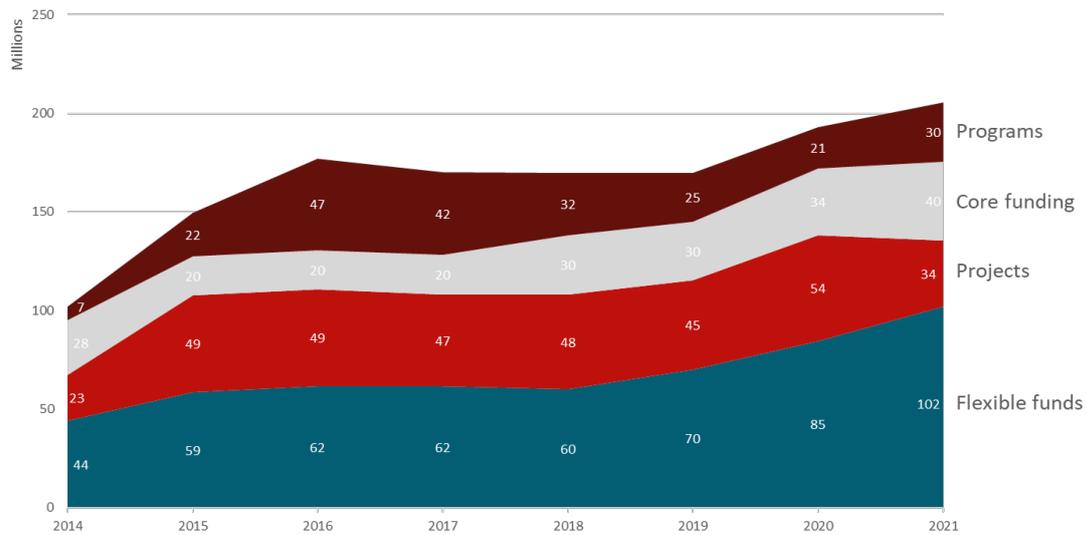
The evaluation methodology included the development of a Theory of Change, and an evaluation matrix constructed around 10 evaluation questions reflecting on the relevance, coherence, effectiveness, efficiency and connectedness of Belgium's humanitarian strategy. The team based itself on the analysis of a mix of primary and secondary data used as evidence for the evaluation. Primary data gathering included key informant interviews, project visits and focus group discussions in three country case studies (the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Lebanon, and Palestine). Secondary data analysis included a typology of funding based on DGD data and an extensive review of available documents made available by DGD and partner organisations.

Main findings

Between 2014 and 2021, annual Belgian humanitarian funding through all four instruments amounted to EUR 164 million on average per year or EUR 1.3 billion over the period 2014-2021. This represents approximately 9 percent of total Belgian Official Development Assistance over the observed period. The recent evolution of distribution between the four instruments reflects the DGD's commitment of allocating 60% of the humanitarian funding to core funding and flexible funding instruments and signifies Belgium's commitment to the Grand Bargain's¹ objectives of decreasing the earmarking of contributions and facilitating multi-year planning and funding. (Figure 1)

¹ The Grand Bargain, launched during the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit, is a unique agreement between some of the largest donors and humanitarian organisations who have committed to get more means into the hands of people in need and to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of the humanitarian action.

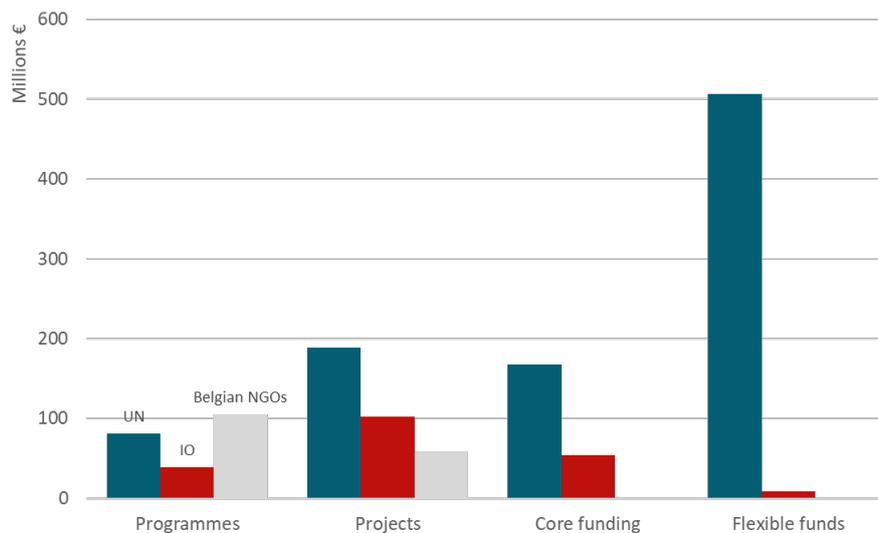
Figure 1: Distribution of DGD Humanitarian Aid funds by funding instrument (2014-2021)



Source: Data received from D5.1, graph by ADE.

UN agencies made up the largest group of recipients of Belgian humanitarian aid (72 percent), through all four financial instruments, but mainly through flexible funds. 15.3 percent of funding goes to international organisations, with about half of those in projects. The only contribution through flexible funds is the annual contribution to the Disaster Relief Emergency Fund of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. Belgian NGOs receive funding almost exclusively through programmes and receive 12.7 percent of total Belgian humanitarian funding. (Figure 2)

Figure 2: Division of partners by partner types (Total 2014-2021)



Source: Data received from D5.1, graph by ADE.

Relevant to needs, but funding modalities of projects and programmes not well-suited

Belgium's approach as a humanitarian donor has increasingly aligned with the growing scale of crises. Overall, it doubled its humanitarian aid funding, from EUR 102 million in 2014 to EUR 206 million in 2021. Belgium proved to be a principled donor, strongly committed to upholding humanitarian principles, International Humanitarian Law and its international commitments.

In Belgium's humanitarian strategy, projects are designed to respond to short-term specific needs and forgotten and under-funded humanitarian crises, whilst programmes are meant to address protracted crises. However, it was found that because of the lengthy decision and funding procedures project funding was not suited for emergency response. For protracted crises situations the duration of programme funding was not sufficiently long to address structural barriers or support sustainability where feasible.

The majority of the humanitarian funding allocated for projects and programmes is allocated for the priority regions and thematic areas identified in the 2014 humanitarian strategy. Overall projects and programmes reflect the humanitarian priorities of the countries affected by crises.

Humanitarian assistance made a difference for affected people

Based on the evidence gathered in the three country case studies and an extensive review of related project and programme documentation, Belgium's humanitarian assistance targeted funding gaps in humanitarian response and was aligned with Humanitarian Response Plans. Several interventions were strategically well positioned and made a noticeable difference in the lives of the target populations. For example, women and girls – victims of sexual and gender based violence – had safe access to medical services and psycho-social support; children's access to education was protected through addressing financial and physical barriers preventing children to attend school; and vulnerable refugee families living in deep poverty were provided with access to livelihoods opportunities.

Project funding was also used to cover gaps in service delivery caused by funding shortfalls in the core budgets of the UN agencies. For example, when UNHCR was facing financial shortfalls assisting Syrian refugees in Lebanon, additional project funds were allocated to cover cash assistance and protection services.

Working with local partners took place across projects and programmes, but it was found that this did not equate with supporting locally led humanitarian action. Projects and programmes were all relevant to the needs of the persons of concern and made a difference in people's lives. Belgium supports coverage and scale in humanitarian responses through its core contributions to multilateral agencies and contributions to a number of Flexible Funds. Funding under these modalities is used to share in the international response for large-scale humanitarian crises (such as the Syria refugee response) and to under-funded crises (such as in the DRC).

Principled humanitarian actor but human resource constraints limits potential

Across the programme and project funding modalities, partners are established humanitarian actors with expertise and experience in humanitarian assistance, which impacts on both the effectiveness and efficiency of the modalities.

DGD's humanitarian team is small and has not grown in relation to increased humanitarian funding budgets over the years. Understaffing adversely affects achieving Belgium's full potential as a strong humanitarian actor globally through policy engagement; it also negatively impacts the monitoring of, and learning from, project and programme implementation.

At the country level, the availability of resources to monitor and engage in advocacy is highly dependent on the levels of in-country staffing to follow up on development cooperation and humanitarian interventions. Overall, the resources allocated at both DGD HQ Brussels and in-country to provide steering and quality monitoring of Belgium's humanitarian assistance is very lean. Resources are not always prioritised for strategic priority areas. It was found that too much time is allocated to monitoring of long-standing partnerships. Under long-standing partnerships with trusted partners the expectation and practice should be that partners provide quality reporting and deliver results with minimal follow up required from DGD.

The Belgian Alliance for Humanitarian International Action (BAHIA) was a project to pilot a different type of engagement between DGD and Belgian NGOs in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. It was found that the mechanism did not enable the Belgian NGO partners to respond to emergencies and did not support a sufficient level of concentration and coordination of funding to make a strong difference.

Limited consideration of protracted nature of crises

The operationalisation of the humanitarian-development nexus – combining both the delivery of humanitarian assistance and the provision of long-term development assistance in protracted crisis situations – is gradually being considered through discussions inside DGD, with the partners, and in some country-level initiatives. Due to the lack of integrated country strategies for Belgium there was a lack of connectedness observed. Humanitarian funding to countries in a protracted crisis has not been allocated based on an analysis of the protracted nature of the humanitarian crisis including an identification of the structural barriers that could be addressed through sustained efforts over a longer period of time.

The lack of connectedness between humanitarian aid and development at country level is a reflection of the institutional disconnect that exists within DGD headquarters in Brussels.

Sustainability through incorporating exit strategies or localisation where possible was not systematically considered. Humanitarian assistance focuses on saving lives and addressing immediate needs. In funding these interventions, sustainability is not always possible to factor in, especially at the start of an emergency response. However, as a crisis becomes increasingly protracted, sustainability can be considered in terms of the provision of services, repairs to infrastructure or providing livelihood opportunities.

Main conclusions

Belgium made a difference to humanitarian aid by being a consistent and principled donor that has aligned its allocations with international appeals for funding and shared in the international responsibility to respond to needs based on humanitarian principles.

Belgium has sought to increase its humanitarian assistance in line with increased needs. It has also achieved its target of providing 60 percent of its funding for core or unearmarked contributions. Belgium has also developed good contextual understanding and capacity in countries such as the DRC. Overall, Belgium's level of financial assistance and engagement has made it a significant humanitarian actor.

Belgium's humanitarian assistance has made a difference in access to basic services and providing protection services to the most vulnerable.

While programmes and projects have provided a useful source of financing for multilateral agencies and NGOs, these modalities need to be revised to be better adapted to recent changes in the humanitarian landscape. The main challenges are that they are not sufficiently differentiated and are not long enough in duration to respond in a protracted crisis or to respond quickly to sudden onset emergencies.

The increase in Belgium's humanitarian funding has not led to an increase in humanitarian expertise and management capacity to steer interventions strategically, leading to humanitarian engagement being not sufficiently strategic at operational level and in terms of humanitarian advocacy.

C1. Belgium's humanitarian assistance was principled and focused on burden sharing with the international community

Belgium's principled stance has contributed to it being considered by (mainly) multilateral humanitarian actors as a reliable humanitarian donor. Belgian funding was allocated to all the major humanitarian crises where burden sharing by the international donor community was required. Belgium also prioritised forgotten humanitarian crises, such as those in the Sahel region and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

C2. Good results under the projects and programmes were observed in terms of improving access to basic services, livelihoods and protection

Funding for projects and programmes made a difference in the lives of vulnerable population groups by providing access to protection services to women and children, food and cash assistance to those in deep poverty and supported reconstruction efforts during conflict or after disasters. Funding made a difference in ensuring the continuation of education for extremely vulnerable children, especially girls.

C3. Humanitarian engagement has not been sufficiently strategic at the operational level

Because the strategy is so broad and encompasses a range of thematic and geographic priorities, projects and programmes by default are in alignment with the strategy.

At an operational level, the international commitments have not been sufficiently translated into strategic guidance influencing the design and implementation of projects and programmes. The absence of such a guiding framework at country level contributes to the fragmentation of interventions and reduces the impact that can be achieved.

C4. Humanitarian advocacy is not sufficiently developed and aligned with Belgium's expertise

Belgium has increasingly put forward localisation, participation and protection as strategic areas for its humanitarian engagement. These are becoming increasingly strategic priorities for humanitarian donors and actors. But developing advocacy around these areas is not sufficiently developed.

C5. Programmes and projects were not fit for purpose for protracted crises and emergency response and require overhauling

The projects and programmes modalities do not sufficiently cover a long enough time period for a protracted crisis. They are also not suited to responding to emergencies or to adjusting quickly to changes in the context. It was found, from an efficiency point of view, that the distinction between projects and programmes is not relevant. Funding decisions, modalities and their duration should be guided by needs and by identifying partners based on their capacity and strengths in addressing those needs.

C6. Belgium does not have a drawdown funding mechanisms to enable the best placed actors to rapidly respond to sudden onset emergencies

There is a need for a revised emergency modality focusing on the best-placed partner(s) to deliver the humanitarian assistance. Modality selection can then be based on the best way to deliver life-saving humanitarian aid.

C7. Capacity of humanitarian staff has not been sufficiently exploited to support policy and knowledge development

Too much staff time is spent on administrative tasks with little time allocated for substantive policy work. Grant processes are heavy and time consuming and not sufficiently focused on gathering evidence for impact.

C8. Humanitarian engagement at the partner country level was not well defined with no frameworks steering Belgium's humanitarian engagement and its connectedness with other Belgian funding streams

In Belgium's partner countries for development, strategy documents exist for Belgium's development cooperation, but these do not integrate humanitarian priorities and funding for the partner country. In some countries, strategic priorities are clarified internally but are not publicly available. The absence of these guiding country-level frameworks contributes to humanitarian assistance and development cooperation being implemented in silos, making nexus programming or localisation more challenging. It also prevents systematic results monitoring and engaging with partners based on expected outcomes.

C9. Institutional barriers have limited progress on operationalising the humanitarian-development-peace nexus

There is an appreciation among staff members that in countries with major conflicts or large protracted crises that are holding back national development, they can do better if they work together on the humanitarian-development-peace nexus. However, the existing planning and programming systems do not lend themselves easily to such collaboration.

A more systematic approach between the different DGD units, embassies, and consulates in order to undertake joint analysis, planning and complementary programming is lacking at the moment, contributing to missed opportunities of nexus programming at the country level.

Recommendations

Seven main recommendations emerge from the findings and conclusions of this evaluation. These recommendations, the proposed responsible actors, and how they relate to the conclusions is presented in table below. More detail, including the proposed actions are provided in the final report. The recommendations require sufficient resources for DGD to carry out the various proposed actions. If need be, emphasis should be placed on the recommendations prioritized as 'high'.

Recommendations	Responsible actors	Link with the conclusions	Priority
R1: Update the 2014 humanitarian strategy to set out clearly Belgium's current prioritisation under its international commitments, and adapt working practices with the aim of maximising efficiency and impact.	DGD, Cabinet of the Minister of Development Cooperation	C1, C2, C9	High
R2: Replace programme and project funding modalities with a multi-year longer-term funding modality to engage in protracted, fragile and forgotten humanitarian crises that is accessible to both multilateral and bilateral partners.	DGD, Cabinet of the Minister of Development Cooperation	C2, C5, C6	High
R3: Develop a new rapid response fund that allows Belgium - through the best placed actors - to respond timely, and in an effective and efficient manner in acute crisis situations complementing Belgium's regular support to the multilateral flexible pooled funds.	DGD, Cabinet of the Minister of Development Cooperation, State Secretary of the Budget	C5, C6	Medium
R4: Strengthen further strategic partnerships and leaner grant mechanisms that put the responsibility with the partner to deliver results.	DGD	C6, C7	High
R5: In partner countries of the Belgian development cooperation, develop joint outcomes and approaches in planning and programming to advance coherence and complementarity.	DGD, Diplomatic posts	C3, C8	Medium
R6: Review the organisational structure, processes and capacity in order to enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of Belgium's humanitarian action and become a more learning organisation.	DGD	C7, C8, C9	High
R7: Raise Belgium's profile as significant humanitarian contributor.	DGD, Cabinet of the Minister of Development Cooperation, Partner organisations	C3, C4, C9	Medium

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