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**REPORT FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND
THE COUNCIL**

**on the Interim Evaluation of the EU Aid Volunteers initiative for the period mid-2014 to
mid-2017**

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1. INTRODUCTION

1. As envisaged in the Treaty of Lisbon¹, the European Union (EU) established the EU Aid Volunteers initiative (hereafter 'the initiative') in 2014. Three legal acts govern the initiative: Regulation (EU) No 375/2014 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 3 April 2014² (hereafter 'the Regulation'), Commission Implementing Regulation (EU) No 1244/2014 of 20 November 2014³ and Commission Delegated Regulation (EU) No 1398/2014 of 24 October 2014⁴. The initiative's objective is to help strengthen the EU's capacity to provide needs-based humanitarian aid and to help increase the capacity and resilience of vulnerable or disaster-affected communities in third countries, while giving European citizens an opportunity to be involved in humanitarian action in third countries, showing solidarity with people in need.

2. The initiative provides funding to consortia of EU-based and non-EU based organisations for the deployment and the preparation for deployment (including apprenticeships) of EU Aid Volunteers to third countries. It also funds projects to develop the capacities of EU-based and non-EU based organisations to comply with the standards and procedures that are required to participate in the initiative and to improve their capacity building, including in volunteer management. The initiative also establishes standards, procedures and a certification mechanism, a training programme to prepare EU Aid volunteers for deployment in third countries, a database with eligible EU Aid volunteers, a network and a communication plan.

3. To implement the initiative, an amount of EUR 147 936 000 has been earmarked for the period between 1 January 2014 and 31 December 2020. While the achievements under the initiative are growing, the implementation of the initiative is considerably below the expectations set in the Multiannual Financial Framework for 2014-2020 in terms of budgetary implementation and number of volunteers trained and deployed.

4. This report sets out the results of the interim evaluation (hereafter 'the evaluation') of the EU Aid Volunteers initiative and is accompanied by a staff working document covering the detailed findings of the evaluation. It builds on the evidence provided in the external

¹ Article 214 (5) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union.

² Regulation (EU) No 375/2014 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 3 April 2014 establishing the European Voluntary Humanitarian Aid Corps ('EU Aid Volunteers initiative') (Official Journal (OJ) L 122, 24.4.2014, p. 1).

³ Commission Implementing Regulation (EU) No 1244/2014 of 20 November 2014 laying down rules for the implementation of Regulation (EU) No 375/2014 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 3 April 2014 establishing the European Voluntary Humanitarian Aid Corps ('EU Aid Volunteers initiative') (OJ L 334, 21.11.2014, p. 52).

⁴ Commission Delegated Regulation (EU) No 1398/2014 of 24 October 2014 laying down standards regarding candidate volunteers and EU Aid Volunteers (OJ L 373, 31.12.2014, p. 8).

evaluation, as well as feedback received during discussions with stakeholders and an open public consultation. The report also indicates potential areas for further development of the initiative, taking into account the recommendations and the need to increase the uptake of the initiative.

2. PURPOSE AND SCOPE OF THE EVALUATION

5. As set out in Article 27(4)(b) of the Regulation, the Commission is required to submit an interim evaluation report to the European Parliament and to the Council. The main purpose of the interim evaluation is to provide an independent assessment of the results obtained and the qualitative and quantitative aspects of the implementation of the Regulation, including the impact of the initiative in the humanitarian sector and the cost-effectiveness of the programme during the first three years of implementation following its establishment in 2014. The evaluation therefore examines implementation of the initiative from mid-2014 to mid-2017.

6. The external evaluation was carried out between May and November 2017⁵. The fact-finding phase included a comprehensive document review and extensive consultations with stakeholders (including at Commission level and with Member State representatives, sending organisations, hosting organisations, EU Aid Volunteers, and other key stakeholders). Different tools were used, including online surveys and semi-structured phone or face-to-face interviews. Six targeted surveys⁶ were carried out and three field missions were conducted in Latin America and the Caribbean, the Middle-East, and South-East Asia⁷. An open public consultation was carried out online for three months (August-October 2017) with a total of 30 responses. Three case studies on different projects carried out through the initiative (i.e. certification, deployment and technical assistance and capacity building) completed the methodological approach.

7. Overall, the surveys and the comments gathered from the interviews provide useful insights into the implementation of the initiative. As a result of the unavailability of final project reports at the time of the evaluation and the limited uptake in the first years, the interim evaluation can only give an indication about the initiative's overall impact on local communities, the improvement in the capacities of stakeholders, the development of skills and the potential impact of EU Aid Volunteers on the humanitarian sector.

⁵ Final report available at: https://ec.europa.eu/echo/funding-evaluations/evaluations/thematic-evaluations_en

⁶ Target groups of surveys: EU Aid Volunteers (candidates and deployed); EU Aid Volunteers sending organisations and their partners; EU Aid Volunteers hosting organisations; Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (DG ECHO) Framework Partnership Agreement partners (those not yet engaged); EU Aid Volunteers pilot project partners (those not yet engaged); and Member States representatives (Council Working Party on Humanitarian Aid and Food Aid (COHAFA), Council Working Party on Civil Protection (PROCIV), and Humanitarian Aid Committee (HAC)).

⁷ Latin America and Caribbean: Haiti and Ecuador; Middle-East: Jordan and Lebanon; and South-East Asia: Myanmar and Cambodia.

3. MAIN FINDINGS

8. The interviews that the external evaluator carried out with the various stakeholder groups found that the initiative's five objectives⁸, as set out in the Regulation, are relevant for the initiative's beneficiaries, sending and hosting organisations and volunteers. Local communities find particularly useful those activities that encourage local volunteering and capacity building to improve skills locally to prepare for disasters. In general, the different actions carried out under the initiative are relevant to the initiative's objectives. However, the objective of communicating the EU's humanitarian aid principles is only considered relevant by a small number of stakeholders (mainly volunteers). This means more attention is required on this point in the initiative's communication activities. Interest from established humanitarian Framework Partnership Agreement partners remains very low, which is problematic for an initiative that is supposed to serve the humanitarian aid sector. Sending and hosting organisations that participate in the initiative have a relatively positive view about its ability to meet their needs, and manage to deploy volunteers with the right profiles in line with the needs of hosting organisations.

9. The initiative has not been effective in achieving its five objectives, and the targets set in the 2014-2020 multiannual financial framework are still far from being met. The budget in the first three years was not fully used, although the figures for 2017 saw a strong uptake in funding for capacity building / technical assistance. The numbers of volunteers, although increasing, remain well below the target. More than 200 EU Aid Volunteers have been deployed to humanitarian projects in third countries. However, the number is far below the targets of 4 000 EU Aid Volunteers by 2020. The main reason for this is the barriers to participation, such as the certification of organisations or the need to form partnerships with other organisations to apply for EU funding. These have posed a particular challenge for organisations that do not operate in established networks. The search for consortium partners and the administrative procedures to manage a consortium hampers effectiveness. The effectiveness of the recruitment process could be further improved by speeding up procedures. The initiative provided a limited contribution to improving the EU's capacity to provide humanitarian aid to date, given its small budget and the slow uptake. There is some evidence from the evaluation surveys that volunteers feel that their skills have improved through the deployment. The few placements offered through the initiative in its early years increased the opportunities for people to contribute to humanitarian aid. There is no evidence so far that the volunteering standards set in the initiative have had positive effects on the national standards of EU Member States. Some organisations find the forming of consortia difficult, especially when they do not work with established networks.

10. Procedures and requirements with a strong impact on the initiative's efficiency are regulated in detail in three legislative acts. Although this creates on the one hand a certain administrative burden for organisations, it is on the other hand positive for the experience of volunteers, because it establishes a transparent recruitment process and supports their learning and development during the deployment. New European rules and procedures for

⁸ Article 7 of the Regulation No 375/2014 states that " The EU Aid Volunteers initiative shall pursue the following operational objectives: to contribute to increasing and improving the EU's capacity to provide humanitarian aid; to improve the skills, knowledge and competences of volunteers in the field of humanitarian aid and the terms and conditions of their engagement; to build the capacity of hosting organisations and foster volunteering in third countries; to communicate the EU's humanitarian aid principles agreed in the European Consensus on Humanitarian Aid; to improve coherence and consistency of volunteering across Member States in order to improve opportunities for EU citizens to participate in humanitarian aid activities and operations."

managing volunteers can be especially burdensome for organisations if they run their national volunteering scheme in parallel to the initiative. Some organisations find the process discouraging, because it can take up to 18 months: from the publication of a call for proposals through the selection process, the publication of vacancies for volunteers, the training of volunteers to the deployment of volunteers. Within this legislative framework, the Commission constantly seeks to simplify and accelerate processes, in order to increase the initiative's attractiveness to stakeholders. The application, selection and reporting procedures appear particularly burdensome for organisations that are mainly active in EU humanitarian aid (emergency response) projects, which follow different procedures for grant management. An efficient monitoring system was put in place, which could be further developed to process qualitative information and ad hoc reports, in addition to quantitative information. Any cost-efficiency analysis can only provide a preliminary assessment, given that no final project reports or related financial data are available at this stage. The external evaluation noted cost-conscious behaviour on the part of the Commission with regard to service contracts, which are based on the number of volunteers trained and insured. The initiative will require simpler processes, more outreach and communication about its potential positive impacts on organisations in the EU and abroad and the way it works, and stronger links between the initiative and EU humanitarian and development objectives and funding.

11. There is room for improvement in the initiative's coherence with humanitarian aid, development and civil protection instruments. The initiative was not embedded in the existing EU instruments providing humanitarian aid, but was set up as a stand-alone instrument. As volunteers must not be deployed to regions of armed conflict, some third countries where a considerable part of humanitarian aid is provided are excluded from the scope of the initiative. Regarding the coherence with EU development cooperation policy, the broad definition of humanitarian aid used in the Regulation allows for synergies, as volunteers can be deployed in a wide variety of projects including activities which link relief, rehabilitation and development and which support and develop the overall resilience of local communities. Even if the initiative is not formally linked to the Sustainable Development Goals, the majority of participating hosting organisations state that they are active in both humanitarian aid and development. The internal consistency of the actions carried out cannot be fully assessed at this stage of the initiative, but their design suggests they should be consistent with each other.

12. The initiative creates EU added value through common standards for managing volunteers from all EU countries, common training, and funding for capacity building and technical assistance. It enables organisations with different backgrounds (e.g. humanitarian, development, civil protection, volunteering organisations) and of different sizes to work together. It is open not only to Framework Partnership Agreement partners but to all EU-based organisations that are active or intend to become active in humanitarian aid. For example, only 3 % of the humanitarian Framework Partnership Agreement partners are organisations from Member States that joined the EU in 2004 or later⁹. The share of these organisations to the total number of certified organisations is much higher (20%). In this respect the initiative was able to involve a broad range of organisations from different EU Member States.

⁹ Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Cyprus, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia, Romania.

4. CONCLUSIONS

13. Taking into account the findings of the external evaluation report and its own experience and dialogue with stakeholders during the initiative's initial implementation period, the Commission's overall conclusion is that the initiative provides added value and its objectives are relevant to stakeholders. However, the evaluation highlights a number of challenges that should be addressed in order to further increase the initiative's impact and make it more attractive for organisations and volunteers. These aspects are highlighted in the accompanying staff working document and are summarised in the following paragraphs.

14. The actions of the initiative are regulated in much detail by three legal acts. There has been a lengthy building-up of a stakeholders' base of organisations in the three first years of implementation. This was coupled with lengthy procedures and a transition of EU funded capacity and technical assistance projects to deployment projects. Once a sufficient number of organisations has successfully undergone certification and reached the standards following the technical assistance and capacity building support, it is expected that the organisations become more confident and more interested in deploying EU Aid Volunteers.

15. Simplification of processes and administrative procedures needs to be put in place in order to increase participation by organisations in the initiative. Feedback received from participating organisations and from organisations that are not yet involved in the initiative shows a clear need for the procedures to be reviewed. For example, sending organisations find the certification process challenging; therefore, consideration should be given to reviewing the certification process and providing more support for interested organisations in the short to medium term. The technical assistance projects, which help organisations reach the expected standards in volunteer management, safety and security, should be better linked to the certification process of EU-based organisations.

16. The initiative's attractiveness may be increased if the time to deployment (from the publication of the calls to the actual deployment) would be reduced from currently one and a half years to more rapid deployments. This would potentially increase the number of deployment opportunities for EU citizens and reduce the number of drop-outs.

17. Interest from organisations active in humanitarian aid in the broader sense, as provided by the Regulation, needs to be strengthened. EU Aid Volunteers are deployed in activities such as resilience building, linking relief, rehabilitation and development, various humanitarian aid related sectors (water, sanitation and hygiene, gender, logistics) but also in development projects on food security, poverty reduction and economic resilience. Harvesting further synergies with existing Commission programmes and projects is already among the objectives set in the Commission Annual Work Programme for 2018.

18. The Commission acknowledges the need to improve consistency of the approach to volunteering in third countries with other EU volunteering schemes. Coherence and synergies with the European Voluntary Service and the European Solidarity Corps should be sought. The complementarity between the humanitarian and development sectors should be optimised.

19. During the initial implementation period, the focus has been mainly on organisational development. The gradual shift of focus from funding processes (supporting volunteer management or organisational capability and capacity) to humanitarian impact-oriented activities would help to address stakeholder expectations in this regard.

20. The better identification of the impact would make the initiative more attractive to organisations and volunteers and help improve its implementation. A monitoring framework has been set up in line with the initiative's intervention logic. Currently, it exclusively collects quantitative data; this should be completed with qualitative data on the impact of projects relating to the humanitarian sector, disaster risk management or linking relief, rehabilitation and development. Performance indicators should be reviewed in terms of their relevance and the feasibility of collecting reliable, sensible and comparable data. In addition to the current performance indicators for the deployment of volunteers, performance indicators should be developed in relation to progress in capacity building and technical assistance, which absorb the majority of the initiative's budget. These would help measure the initiative's impact on local communities, participating organisations and volunteers and highlight the links between EU Aid Volunteers projects and humanitarian aid/disaster preparedness projects. Better cooperation with the humanitarian aid field offices and EU Delegations, including on monitoring of EU Aid Volunteers projects should be further explored.

5. THE WAY FORWARD

21. The evaluation provides useful analyses and insights into the implementation of the initiative, including current shortcomings and suggests areas for further improvement. The Commission is taking forward the findings and recommendations of the evaluation in a two-pronged approach: by considering actions that can be implemented in the short to medium term within the current legal framework on the one hand and actions that would require more fundamental changes into the EU Aid Volunteers legislation.

22. On the first set of actions, the results of the evaluation will immediately feed back into the programme design and allocation of resources. The Commission is already working on actions to be implemented from now until the end of the current implementation period in 2020 with a view to speed up processes, simplify administrative procedures, improve support for interested organisations, further promote the funding opportunities and share success stories. For example this will be achieved through a further simplification of the certification process for organisations with Framework Partnership Agreements avoiding any duplication within the two administrative procedures, shortening of the electronic forms for certification, acceleration of the duration from publication of the call to deployment of volunteers, scaling up of promotion activities to showcase the impact of volunteers in the field. Another key area is to increase the deployment of EU Aid Volunteers in the Commission's humanitarian aid and disaster risk reduction and development cooperation projects.

23. The second set of actions is linked to the ongoing Commission's work on the future of EU programmes under the next Multiannual Financial Framework. The findings from this interim evaluation will usefully contribute to shaping the Commission's proposal for spending programmes beyond 2020. In this respect the Commission will strive to achieve a significant

simplification of procedures by removing the elements that slow down the deployment of volunteers and create a significant administrative burden for participating organisations. Synergies and streamlining with other EU volunteering schemes, notably the European Solidarity Corps will be sought. The Commission will aim at providing more clarity for EU citizens seeking volunteering opportunities inside and outside the EU. Better alignment with the EU objectives on linking relief, rehabilitation and development and humanitarian aid-development will be considered to increase participation by humanitarian and development organisations and volunteering opportunities.

24. While building upon experience to date, lessons learnt and addressing the recommendations in the interim evaluation, the Commission will continue to implement and further develop the initiative working closely with Member States, EU institutions and bodies, organisations and citizens. Feedback from stakeholders will continue to be the main driver for improvements, leading to a greater impact of the initiative in the next phase of implementation until 2020 and beyond.