

EU response to the COVID-19 pandemic: good practices and preliminary lessons learnt

1. Introduction

In late 2019, a novel coronavirus (the SARS-CoV-2) caused an outbreak of a new respiratory and potentially lethal disease (COVID-19). The pandemic has triggered a major global crisis with ramifications in different areas. The European Commission has provided a comprehensive response to this major crisis from different angles (economic, border management, public health, etc.). This concept note will set focus on the crisis management aspect of the EU response, notably through the involvement of the Directorate General for Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid operations (DG ECHO).

DG ECHO is directly responsible for the Union Civil Protection Mechanism (UCPM), a policy instrument bringing together all EU Member States and six non-EU countries, that facilitates coordination in disaster management, and which can be activated by any country in the world. During the peak of the pandemic, Member States resorted to the Union Civil Protection Mechanism (UCPM) for support, especially on to the newly emergency medical stockpiling reserve under rescEU, one of the key innovations of the UCPM reform in 2019. In addition to the UCPM, DG ECHO has also been at the forefront of the EU response to the crisis, notably in the framework of the ‘Emergency Support Instrument’ (ESI) managing the so-called ‘Mobility Package’. Through its double-hatted role, DG ECHO has also been active in providing humanitarian assistance and relief.

The Emergency Response Coordination Centre (ERCC), the 24/7 operational hub, has been at the centre of operations and has played a key role in the coordination of all DG ECHO’s activities.

2. EU civil protection across Europe

Since the beginning of the crisis, the UCPM has received 53 times requests for assistance in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic. With these unprecedented figures, the EU has been helping coordinate and finance the delivery of medical equipment and related items (protective facemasks, disinfectant and other products) across Europe and the world, to countries that have sought assistance.

In early April, for instance, European Medical Teams composed of doctors and nurses from Romania and Norway were deployed to Italy via the UCPM and coordinated by the ERCC. Moreover, through the UCPM, 17 Member States have offered more than 90,000 items of in-kind assistance to Greece, such as shelter, health and sanitation items, some of these are used to support efforts in preventing a coronavirus outbreak.

3. An emergency medical ‘safety-net’ – RescEU stockpile

On 19 March, the European Commission created a strategic rescEU capacity – a common European reserve – of emergency medical equipment, such as ventilators, protective masks, gloves and laboratory supplies to help EU countries face the coronavirus pandemic. The Commission finances 100% of the capacity (including the procurement, maintenance and the delivery costs), which is hosted by several Member States and is constantly replenished. Germany and Romania were the first Member States to host the rescEU reserve, followed by Denmark, Greece, Hungary and Sweden in September. The hosting States are responsible for procuring the equipment with the support of the Commission. The Emergency Response Coordination Centre manages the distribution of the equipment to ensure it goes where it is needed most.

On 2 June, the Commission proposed to reinforce rescEU with €2 billion over 2021-2027, to strengthen the response capabilities of the European Union in cases of additional cross-border emergencies. The additional funding will be used to create reserves of strategic equipment to cover health emergencies, forest fire outbreaks, chemical, biological, radiological, or nuclear incidents or other major emergencies. As such, the total budget for the European Union Civil Protection Mechanism will top €3,1 billion. The Emergency Response Coordination Centre is managing the distribution of the equipment to ensure that it quickly reaches those in need.

So far, 650,000 FFP2 and FFP3 protective facemasks from the rescEU medical reserve were delivered to Italy (142,000), Spain (173,000), Croatia (65,000), Lithuania (20,000), Montenegro (62,000) and North Macedonia (148,000) and Serbia (10,000). Additionally, protective gowns were further distributed to Montenegro (15,000) and North Macedonia (35,000).

The rescEU reserve is constantly replenished and deliveries happen regularly based on the needs of the participating countries.

4. Bringing stranded citizens home

Another area where the Commission and other EU services, notably the EEAS, have provided essential support is around the coordination of assistance and consular repatriation operations of EU citizens from across the world.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, more than half a million people have been flown back to Europe thanks to flights organised by the Member States. In addition, the UCPM has facilitated the over 82,000 EU citizens to Europe from all over the world.

5. Emergency Support Instrument – Transport support through the Mobility Package

The Emergency Support Instrument (ESI) was reactivated in March 2020 to provide a flexible and comprehensive framework for EU institutions to support Member States. Under its umbrella, different initiatives are being undertaken, being the so-called ‘Mobility

Package' entrusted to DG ECHO. With a budget of EUR 220 million, the ESI Mobility Package helps EU countries around three key strands:

a) the transport of medical items to where they are most needed, by financing the cargo transport of assistance and relief items to and between EU Member States;

b) the transfer of patients between EU Member States or from Member States to neighbouring countries, so that where health services risk being overwhelmed, spare capacity elsewhere can be used, so ensuring treatment for as many patients as possible;

c) the transport of medical personnel and mobile medical teams between EU Member States and into the EU from other neighbouring countries, to help people wherever medical assistance is needed most.

The Commission has allocated EUR 150 million to support 18 Member States and the UK to finance cargo shipments between April and September 2020, including life-saving personal protective equipment, medicines and medical equipment. For example, the action supported the transport of a shared shipment of more than 1,000 tonnes of essential personal protective equipment to Czechia and Slovakia.

6. Assistance outside the EU

DG ECHO has also contributed to the global EU response to the pandemic, following the 'Team Europe' approach, combining resources from the EU, its Member States and financial institutions to support each partner country.

One of the flagship initiatives managed by DG ECHO has been the 'EU Humanitarian Air Bridge' (EU HAB). Since the coronavirus pandemic has brought about critical logistical challenges for the humanitarian community, on 8 May the Commission decided to set up this temporary initiative based on a set of air transport services enabling the delivery of humanitarian aid and essential medical supplies for the coronavirus response to countries mostly affected by air transport constraints. The air bridge flights carry essential medical equipment, humanitarian cargo and staff, and in turn have also assisted with repatriation flights organised by EU Member States.

To date, over 67 Air Bridge flights, fully funded by the Commission, have delivered tons of medical equipment and supplies, as well as medical and humanitarian staff to critical areas in Africa, Asia and Latin America.

7. Reflections for the future

As outline in this concept note, the COVID-19 crisis has triggered a strong European response, showing concrete and tangible solidarity amongst Member States and EU institutions.

The crisis has also exposed shortcomings at multiple levels and in different sectors, including European as well as national. The pandemic has shown that the complex interdependent global system we live in cannot cope with crises from a simple national perspective, and that joint efforts and solidarity are essential to cope with and overcome its impact.

Disclaimer: *The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official position of the European Commission. The document might contain figures that may no longer be accurate. For updated information, please check the specific official European Commission website: https://ec.europa.eu/info/live-work-travel-eu/coronavirus-response/crisis-management-and-solidarity_en*