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EU-China engagement in humanitarian aid: Different approaches, shared interests?

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EU-China Engagement in Humanitarian Aid: Different Approaches, Shared Interests?

Summary

Protracted crises and frequent natural disasters have generated an unprecedented number of people in need of humanitarian assistance. The international community faces a great challenge in supporting these populations, as the gap between needs and available funding is growing. To close this resource gap, the European Union (EU) aims to step up its engagement with emerging donors, particularly China, to increase their level of funding. Although China has previously been reluctant to engage in the international humanitarian system, its response to the COVID-19 pandemic indicates a change in attitude. Over the past year, China has delivered hundreds of tonnes of personal protective equipment (PPE) to over 150 countries and dispatched medical teams abroad. It has also donated \$100 million to the World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations (UN) and pledged to establish a global humanitarian response depot and hub in China in cooperation with the UN.

Amidst increasing geopolitical tensions between China and the EU, China's growing humanitarian engagement opens an opportunity for the EU to engage with China in the humanitarian sector. However, rather than framing China's increased engagement in solely financial terms, the EU should develop a long-term strategy as to how to engage with China on humanitarian matters. A dialogue that takes both parties' different approaches towards humanitarian aid into account and searches for common ground could open the door towards possible cooperation. This would not only help in narrowing the funding gap but carry the potential for greater coordination and consequently more effective assistance provision.

China conceptualises humanitarian aid as a subcategory of development aid and provides the majority of its assistance

bilaterally. Beijing's state-centric approach to humanitarian assistance means in practice that it engages mostly in the aftermath of natural disasters rather than conflict settings. The EU, on the other hand, has a separate humanitarian aid policy that guides the allocation of funds and provides its humanitarian assistance through non-governmental organisations (NGOs), UN agencies and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC).

This Briefing Paper maps out the characteristics of Chinese humanitarian aid and outlines two areas on which the EU's tentative steps towards a dialogue with China could focus.

- **Food security sector:** Food insecurity is a key component in existing humanitarian needs, only exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Food assistance and nutrition are already a key area of engagement for the EU and China. The EU should advocate for China to scale up its contributions to global food security through the World Food Programme (WFP), with whom China has a good working relationship. This could be combined with a political dialogue on how to foster cooperation on food security assistance.
- **Anticipatory humanitarian aid:** Disaster risk reduction, preparedness and response play an increasingly important role in global humanitarian aid. China has built up its most significant expertise in response to natural disasters. Enhancement of disaster risk reduction is one of the strategic priorities of the Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (DG ECHO) for 2020–2024. In light of both parties' interest in anticipatory humanitarian aid, knowledge exchange in this area has the potential to open the door for future cooperation.

Engagement with China to address resource gap in humanitarian aid

A growing number of protracted crises, record levels of displacement and frequent natural disasters have generated an unprecedented number of people in need of humanitarian assistance. The COVID-19 pandemic has further exacerbated vulnerable populations’ existing humanitarian needs with a particularly negative impact on food security. The latest WFP report estimates that 270 million people are acutely food insecure or at high risk in 2021. In response, the total requirements for the UN Global Humanitarian Response Plan for COVID-19 reached a record high of \$39 billion by November 2020. However, with contributions stagnating, the UN is facing a record funding gap of \$22 billion (OCHA, 2021a, p. 9).

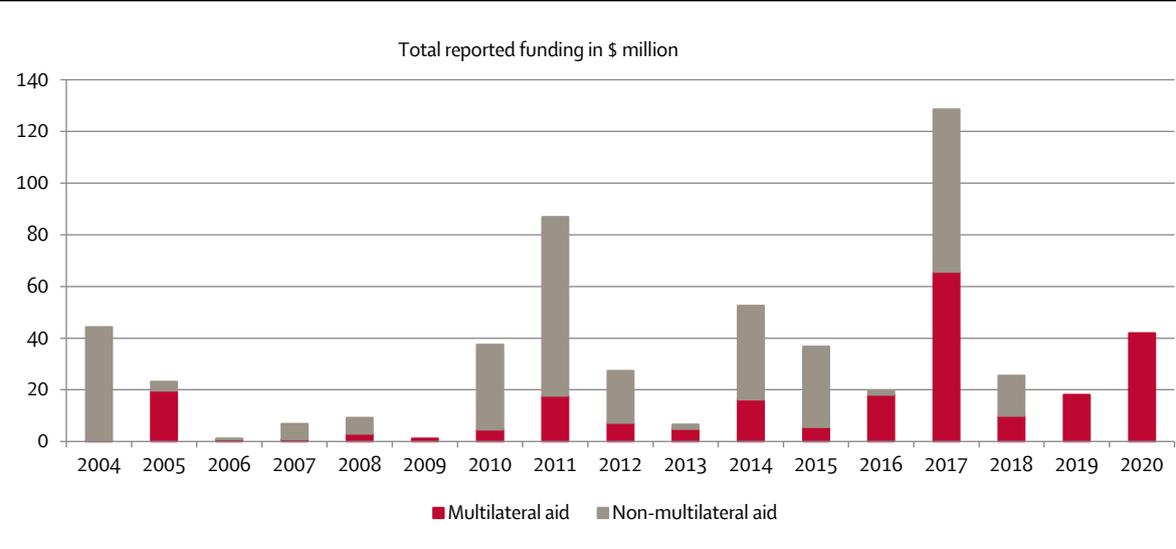
To close this resource gap, the EU, increasingly exasperated with shouldering the biggest share of international humanitarian funding, aims to step up its engagement with other traditional and emerging donors to increase their level of funding. With regards to emerging donors, the Communication on the EU’s humanitarian action from 10 March 2021 specifically points out China.

Compared to China’s developmental budget and its economic capacity, humanitarian aid has been traditionally of low priority for Beijing. However, although China’s aid contributions trail those of traditional donors – even at its largest annual contribution in 2017 China provided less than 1 per cent of total reported humanitarian funding – they have grown substantially over the past decade. Furthermore, China’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic

indicates a turning point for its international humanitarian engagement. In the largest and widest ranging emergency humanitarian operation since the founding of the People’s Republic in 1949, China delivered hundreds of tonnes of PPE to over 150 countries, dispatched 35 medical teams abroad and donated \$100 million to the WHO and the UN Global Humanitarian Response Plan for COVID-19. In addition, President Xi Jinping pledged to set up a \$2 billion COVID-19 recovery fund for developing countries within the next two years and to establish a global humanitarian response depot and hub in China in cooperation with the UN. Furthermore, China’s most recent White Paper on its international development cooperation from January 2021 gives unprecedented attention to humanitarian aid, illustrating its increased strategic significance for Beijing.

China’s growing interest in humanitarian aid opens an opportunity for the EU to engage with China in the humanitarian sector. However, rather than framing the wish for China’s increasing engagement in solely financial terms, the EU should develop a long-term strategy as to how to engage with China on humanitarian matters. In light of the increasing geopolitical tensions between the EU and China, as illustrated in recent reciprocal sanctions and halting of talks on the EU-China Comprehensive Agreement on Investments, this is no easy task. Yet, engaging in a constructive dialogue that looks for a common denominator in spite of both parties’ different understandings of humanitarian aid might open the door towards possible cooperation. This would not only help in narrowing the funding gap but could have the potential for greater coordination between the actors and consequently more effective assistance provision.

Figure 1: Officially reported Chinese humanitarian aid



Note: It has to be noted that presenting an accurate picture of China’s spending is difficult as reporting to the Financial Tracking Service (FTS) is voluntary and not necessarily complete. China does not include the cost of deploying international search and rescue teams and has not reported any bilateral funding to the FTS since 2018. The Chinese government’s White Paper on COVID-19 response from June 2020 and official press releases by the China International Development Cooperation Agency (CIDCA), however, demonstrate that China did provide extensive bilateral humanitarian aid in addition to its reported multilateral contribution in 2020.

Source: Authors, based on OCHA 2021b.

EU and Chinese humanitarian aid – different conceptualisations, actors and priorities

The first and most significant difference between the EU and China's humanitarian aid is Beijing's state-centric approach. Rooted in traditional Confucian concepts of responsibility, which view alleviating suffering as the state's central duty and an important source of its legitimacy, Chinese humanitarian aid is based on the understanding of the state as the primary responder in disaster relief.

The main responsibility for China's humanitarian aid lies with the China International Development Cooperation Agency (CIDCA). Given that this mandate was previously shared by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Commerce, CIDCA's creation in March 2018 was a starting point for the Chinese government to address its aid effectiveness. Whereas CIDCA is set up directly under the State Council Information Office (SCIO) and is responsible for policy-making, project approvals, coordination and funding management, one of the key actors in the delivery of domestic and international humanitarian aid is the People's Liberation Army. In addition, the number of Chinese civil society organisations (CSOs) engaged in humanitarian activities has been on the rise since the Nepal earthquake in 2015, where they provided emergency rescue and relief services. While Chinese CSOs work in close affiliation with the Chinese government and are therefore not comparable to Western NGOs, they do contribute to a growing pluralisation of the Chinese humanitarian aid sector (Hirono, 2018).

The second difference between the EU and China is that the EU separates development cooperation from its humanitarian assistance and has a separate humanitarian aid policy that guides the allocation of funds. China, on the other hand, conceptualises humanitarian aid as a subcategory of development aid and stresses that "[w]hile effectively addressing short-term humanitarian needs, the international community should prioritize development" (Permanent Mission of the People's Republic of China to the UN, 2020). Rather than following an explicit humanitarian aid policy, China's humanitarian engagement is guided by its foreign aid policy. Consequently, CIDCA's mandate includes the alignment of China's foreign aid operations with its foreign policy goals, in particular the Belt and Road Initiative. The principles of mutual respect for sovereignty, non-interference in internal affairs, and equality form the basis for its cooperation with the Global South. Therefore, when providing humanitarian aid and stressing the importance of multilateralism and adherence to humanitarian principles, China insists on respecting the primary role of the recipient country in the coordination of humanitarian assistance (Hirono, 2018).

Whereas the EU provides humanitarian aid via international NGOs, UN agencies and the ICRC, Beijing provides more than half of its humanitarian aid bilaterally to other governments. Multilateral contributions reported to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA)

Financial Tracking Service between 2004 and 2020 accounted for just over 40 per cent of Chinese total humanitarian funding and were channelled almost exclusively through the UN. The main beneficiary of these contributions is the WFP, which received almost 80 per cent of China's total multilateral humanitarian contributions between 2011 and 2019, demonstrating the Chinese preference for food security.

As one of the most natural disaster stricken countries, China has built up its most significant expertise in response to natural catastrophes and Beijing provides the majority of its relief assistance in response to such disasters rather than to conflict settings, like the EU. Providing humanitarian aid in conflict settings would involve assisting people in areas controlled by opposition forces and inevitably interfering with the recipient country's sovereignty, which violates China's principle of non-interference. Consequently, China's contributions to humanitarian crises in the past have been rather ad hoc, focusing on one or two natural disaster emergencies per year. In 2019 for example, the response to Cyclone Idai hitting Mozambique and Zimbabwe constituted over 80 per cent of total Chinese humanitarian funding. Over the past 15 years, the geographic priorities in China's humanitarian aid allocations have shifted from China's greater neighbourhood to sub-Saharan African countries, which have been receiving the majority share of China's humanitarian assistance since 2011.

Areas for EU-China cooperation in the humanitarian sector

The EU's endeavour to increase engagement with China is still in its infancy. The preceding German Presidency of the Council of the EU wanted to use its time in office from July to December 2020 to "identify existing Member State initiatives, establish a common strategic understanding, exchange best practices, and facilitate EU-wide coordination" (Auswärtiges Amt, 2020, p. 4). In spite of this ambition, little progress was made on the issue. In the absence of a clear humanitarian agenda, it has been difficult for EU officials to identify who within CIDCA is in charge of humanitarian aid and could act as an official partner. Another challenge is the absence of discussion platforms through which a possible dialogue could be pursued, as China does not take part in any international donor fora and is not a member of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Development Assistance Committee (DAC) or the OCHA Donor Support Group. The German Presidency initially considered addressing humanitarian aid as part of broader dialogues between the EU and China but as many of the events did not take place due to the COVID-19 pandemic, this opportunity could not be realised.

From an EU perspective, a possible dialogue with China in the humanitarian sector has to take the specificities of China's humanitarian aid into account. Rather than trying to persuade China to assimilate into the Western-dominated international humanitarian system, the EU is better advised

to focus its steps towards China on less sensitive areas, such as the food security sector and anticipatory humanitarian aid.

Chronic and acute hunger were on the rise even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, and food insecurity is a key component in existing humanitarian needs. Increasing food prices have a greater impact on people in low- and middle-income countries than those in high-income settings, as the former spend a larger share of their income on food. The greatest risk of food insecurity crises according to the WFP is concentrated in African countries. In response to the amplified humanitarian needs, the EU has increased its humanitarian aid budget for 2021 by 60 per cent to €1.4 billion. Food assistance and nutrition represent approximately one third of the EU's annual humanitarian budget. China has an established presence in the majority of those African countries threatened by food insecurity and has recently signed agreements with the WFP to provide food assistance to several countries which face serious food insecurity challenges. Given China's long working relationship with the WFP and insistence that the WFP continues to focus its efforts on food provision, the EU should encourage China to demonstrate that it is a "responsible great power" by further increasing its funding to the WFP. This could be combined with an offer to strengthen the political dialogue over possible ways to foster cooperation on food security assistance.

Anticipatory humanitarian aid includes disaster risk reduction, preparedness and response, and plays an increasingly important role in global humanitarian aid. The enhancement

of disaster risk reduction and engagement in better dialogue with other actors in response to emergencies are core priorities of DG ECHO's Strategic Plan for 2020–2024. DG ECHO has also recently strengthened the Union Civilian Protection Mechanism, which is responsible for disaster preparedness. Its activities include the development of early warning and information systems, scientific analysis and support, emergency planning, risk awareness, institutional and professional capacity-building, prevention and preparedness missions, and training programmes. China has built up its most significant expertise in response to natural disasters and its disaster management tools are specifically tailored for responses in low- and middle-income settings. The China International Search and Rescue (CISAR) team obtained the UN's highest external classification for rescue forces in 2019 and is regarded as one of the most advanced search and rescue teams in the world. Knowledge exchange in disaster risk reduction and management would therefore go both ways.

In any case, expectations on the potential of EU-China cooperation on humanitarian aid should remain realistic and endeavours should be seen as a marathon rather than a sprint. Nonetheless, given that humanitarian needs are unlikely to decrease in the near future, it is important to seek a constructive conversation with China in order to increase humanitarian funding and improve the efficiency of available humanitarian aid. A first step towards a dialogue, as tentative as it might be, is a step in the right direction.

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