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**Speaking points for address of Dominic Crowley, VOICE President  
to ECHO Annual Partner Conference December 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2019**

Good afternoon.

(1. Introduction)

- This is the second time that I have had the opportunity to address this conference in my role as the President of VOICE, and I am very pleased to be here again. I would like to thank Monique for the opportunity to comment on the past day and a half – and on the past year. But I am conscious that I am speaking at the end of a heavy conference so I will try to be brief.

- But, first, a couple of words of thanks...

- Firstly, to the now ex-Commissioner Stylianides for his contribution to EU humanitarian aid over the last five years – particularly for his commitment to education in emergencies, his effective engagement with the EEAS – successfully maintaining the integrity of principled humanitarian aid in this relationship - and for his enthusiasm for visiting and bringing attention to crisis contexts. ECHO is in a stronger place now than it was five years ago.

- I would also like to congratulate the new Commissioner, Mr Lenarčič, on his appointment. We were delighted that he was able to open the conference yesterday, especially as it was his first day in the new job. I was encouraged by his comments, especially in terms of maintaining support for IHL and principled humanitarian aid, and for deepening the focus on disaster prevention and preparedness. We look forward to establishing an effective partnership with him and his cabinet.

- Finally – in terms of the thanks, not my overall comments! - I would like to thank Monique and her team in ECHO for agreeing to defer the launch of the new FPA and

for being open to discussing the content of the *ex-ante* assessment with ECHO's partners, but I will come back to this.

## (2. Our respective Challenges)

There is a danger when making a speech like this that you sound like an old rock group, reeling off the old favourites of past performances, but there is a lot that was of concern twelve months ago that remains of concern today and for the year ahead...

### *2.1: The EU and ECHO*

Last year I noted that 2019 would be an important year ... and it was. We have a new European Parliament, a new head of the EEAS, and a new college of commissioners.

2020 is also going to be a challenging year. We have the obvious headline issues of the MFF and should (dare I say 'finally?') have a Brexit. But, in addition:

- The results of the European elections suggest a fragmentation in European politics and conflicting expectations of the European Union. This will not make ECHO's life easier, but we hope that a collective commitment to principled humanitarian aid can be preserved across the EU Member States.
- This morning's presentation from OLAF suggested the increasing pressure that ECHO is subject to in relation to financial oversight. This pressure is also coming from the European Court of Auditors, DG Budget and from the EC central services pushing for more harmonized approaches that may challenge ECHO's established ways of working. It is also coming from the Parliament's Budget Control Committee that is asking for ever more detailed information on how the EU humanitarian aid budget is spent.

As ECHO partners, we see at least some of the numerous challenges that confront ECHO – not least because many of them are then passed on to us. The question remains as to whether and how we can collectively meet these requirements.

## *2.2: NGOs' challenges*

And of course there are also very many challenges facing NGOs and I would like to highlight just four of them:

1. **Access:** even for those of us who work with or through national and local partners, access is becoming increasingly multi-dimensional and challenging – whether due to insecurity, bureaucratic obstruction, denial of access, the implications of the derisking approaches of banks - the list goes on and on... but the bottom line is that the delivery of humanitarian aid is becoming more challenging – as if it was not already difficult enough.
2. **Compliance:** despite constant calls for simplification, the administrative burden is only increasing. While we understand the ‘why’ of most of the rules and requirements, the accumulation of them – multiplied by the number of donors we are working with, plus the demands from host governments – require ever more financial and human resources and time. And this is before we consider the impact of counter terrorism regulations and sanctions (issues discussed at last year’s Conference and recently explored further in a VOICE workshop).
3. **Competing/contradictory demands:** while we remain deeply committed to addressing the needs of crisis-affected people, and to delivering high quality aid, most of us feel caught between the competing demands of increasing our ‘efficiency’ (which covers a broad sweep of issues) and meeting more compliance demands while trying to improve the scale, quality and impact of our work in areas that are increasingly difficult to access. The objective reality

is that providing assistance is ever more challenging and costly, and our concern is that this reality is not being equally acknowledged and responded to by all donors.

4. Finally – and recognising that all too many of our discussions seem to come back to this point - is the issue of **budgets**. We all know that humanitarian needs are at record levels and continuing to grow and that, after years of corresponding growth, the global humanitarian budget has plateaued. We also know that, year on year, only 50% of the global humanitarian appeal is met.

ECHO's ambition in relation to the next MFF is well known and, I am sure, supported by all here, but the fluidity of the MFF negotiations can be seen by yesterday's budget negotiation proposal from the Finnish government. For those of you who missed it, it suggested a cut of more than 5% to the 'Neighbourhood and the World' heading from which ECHO is funded.

While this is a proposed budget for discussion and will change, we should not assume that the humanitarian budget will be significantly increased in the MFF unless we fight for it. This is a challenge for all of us – but it is a far greater challenge to the record number of disaster affected people our programmes seek to support.

VOICE members at national and Brussels level are actively working to influence the shape of the next MFF, but more needs to be done, including in relation to the new Parliamentarians and especially with our respective governments. We should all seek to use influence the budget discussion at all of these levels in the coming months.

### *(3. Where we can work together to overcome some of those challenges – opportunities)*

To build on that idea of collective influencing, I would like to highlight three additional areas on which we could – and should - work collectively:

1. The **new FPA** (or the FFPA as it may be): to date, the consultation process between ECHO and its NGO partners – particularly through the FPA Watch Group – has been very good. The openness of ECHO colleagues to discuss issues, the quality of the dialogue, and the breadth of the consultation have all been positive. I am hopeful that this spirit and openness will be reflected in the draft of the new FPA and that there will be equal openness to discuss its final wording, format and the process around the transition between the current and new FPAs.

All new processes bring challenges, and the *ex ante* assessment process is not immune to these. There is considerable unevenness in relation to projected costs and time required being quoted to NGOs by auditors to complete the assessments, and some concern as to the audit results. We welcome ECHO's willingness to hold a webinar for auditors to assist the process, and hope that the assessment process will not deter NGOs from seeking the new FFPA as it is in a diversity of actors that we see greater strength, innovation and coverage.

2. **Nexus**: perhaps sadly, by definition, a 'single nexus' is not an option, so we have various double, triple, and quadruple nexus, and a lot of creative arguments as to what each of them may mean. Yesterday's nexus session highlighted the need for a continued discussion in which **all** relevant actors can engage to establish an understanding of the comparative advantages of different actors working in conflict contexts.

The new VOICE triple nexus study notes that the barriers and enablers to a nexus approach cover a wide range of issues such as funding instruments, operating modalities, institutional culture and the many potential challenges to the principled delivery of humanitarian aid.

We are ready and willing – perhaps even keen - to discuss the nexus further in a concrete and context specific way, but our experience with integrated approaches also requires us to constantly evaluate when the risks of such approaches outweigh the opportunities. When the benefits of better alignment, coordination and complementarity are outweighed by the impact of other actors’ actions – or the perception of these actions – and result in challenges to the security of humanitarian staff or the level of access that can be achieved to crisis affected populations.

3. The third issue I want to focus briefly on is that of **restrictive measures**. Last year we were very pleased with the discussion on the impact of sanctions and counter-terrorism measures. ECHO has continued to focus on these – including through the organisation of a high-level event together with the Belgian government on the margins of UNGA. Last month, VOICE organised a workshop at which ECHO colleagues actively participated along with colleagues from EU Member States, the EEAS and the Foreign Policy Instrument. But these measures continue to be a significant and growing challenge. We need to continue to work on them together - not only to defend humanitarian space, but also to raise awareness of the unintended impact they are having on the delivery of humanitarian aid in a growing number of countries.

To conclude – finally! The year ahead promises to be a challenging one but there are many opportunities for us to strengthen our partnership. Collective work and consultation is not always easy. It requires commitment, time and effort, but experience shows that it is always worth it. There is much on which we could work together and I hope that we will be able to commit to trying to do this.

Thank you.