

Environment in Humanitarian Action: What Donors Need to Know



The integration of environment into humanitarian action is critical to ensure effectiveness, sustainability and accountability of humanitarian operations. Integrating environmental considerations during the early phases of emergency response strengthens people's livelihoods, fosters resilience and reduces the risk of cascading impacts and future emergencies.

PRINCIPLES

The Core Humanitarian Standard on Quality and Accountability¹ identifies the need to act on environmental issues systematically. This is well-recognized by the designation of environment as one of the four major cross-cutting humanitarian issues². Environment is also acknowledged in core humanitarian policy documents³; it is a component of the do no harm principle⁴; and, integral to the promotion of human rights in humanitarian action⁵.

The 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) urges all humanitarians to increase their cooperation across sectors and to work closer with their respective counterparts in the fields of development, peace operations, environment, climate change, biodiversity and gender equality. Only then can the mutual goal of reducing vulnerability and improving risk management be adequately addressed⁶. UN Member States agreed that the SDGs are indivisible and should be implemented in an integrated manner. Humanitarian action interacts through a complex range of multi-layered mechanisms with all SDGs. Environment - humanitarian interactions operate through reduced exposure (SDG 1.5, 3.9, 6.3, 8.4, 11.6, 12.4, 12.8, 13.3), improved resilience of communities (SDG 1.5, 2.4, 8.4, 11.4, 11.5, 11.b, 13.1, 17.7) and ensured sustainability (SDG 6.4, 9.1, 9.4, 11.b, 12.8, 12.c, 13.3, 17.14).



Addressing environmental sustainability as part of humanitarian action follows the guiding principles of the World Humanitarian Summit, where the commitment to a New Way of Working around collective outcomes aims to not only meet humanitarian needs, but to also reduce needs, risk and vulnerability over time. It also answers some of the Grand Bargain commitments, specifically those focusing on enhanced engagement between humanitarian and development actors, increased multi-year funding and increased involvement of the people receiving aid.

¹ Core Humanitarian Standard, "Core Humanitarian Standard on Quality and Accountability", CHS Alliance, Groupe URD and the Sphere Project, 2014. Available at: <http://www.corehumanitarianstandard.org/the-standard>

² Inter-Agency Standing Committee, "Reference Module for Cluster Coordination at Country Level", revised July 2015. Available at: <http://who.int/health-cluster/about/cluster-system/cluster-coordination-reference-module-2015.pdf>; Inter-Agency Standing Committee, "Reference Module for the implementation of the Humanitarian Programme Cycle", Version 2.0 July 2015. Available at: https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/system/files/hpc_reference_module_2015_final_.pdf

³ E.g. Principle 8 of the Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in Disaster Relief, available at <https://www.icrc.org/eng/assets/files/publications/icrc-002-1067.pdf>

⁴ E.g. European Commission (2007) states: "The 'do no harm principle' is the minimum requirement underlying (humanitarian) policies and aid approaches, which also means that environmental and other longer-term considerations must be taken into account from the outset even in short-term emergency interventions."

⁵ United Nations Development Group 2015

⁶ Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, "Leaving No One Behind: Humanitarian Effectiveness in the Age of the Sustainable Development Goals", OCHA Policy and Studies Series, 2016. Available at: https://www.unocha.org/sites/unocha/files/LeavingNoOneBehind_20151109_Small.pdf

WHY INTEGRATE ENVIRONMENTAL CONSIDERATIONS INTO HUMANITARIAN ACTION?

Many examples illustrate how humanitarian activities, by failing to take environmental issues into account, have undermined the purpose and objective of lifesaving activities and negatively affected the livelihoods of affected communities. For instance, the failure to meet waste treatment standards led to a massive environmental contamination in Haiti, and resulted in the largest outbreak of cholera in recent history.

Addressing the environmental aspects of humanitarian action aligns with the key objectives of emergency response: to save lives, alleviate suffering and maintain human dignity during and after human-induced crises and disasters caused by natural hazards.

The principles of Good Humanitarian Donorship⁷ call on donors to use humanitarian assistance to support the transition from relief and recovery to long-term development and sustainable livelihoods. Such assistance can reduce the impacts of future crises, improve environmental management and support the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).



⁷ Good Humanitarian Donorship, '24 principles and good practice of humanitarian donorship', principle #1, June 2018.

HOW CAN DONORS HAVE AN IMPACT?

Through their role as financiers and supporters of humanitarian interventions, donors have a vital role in setting standards, operational procedures, guidelines and norms for ensuring that humanitarian action is sustainable, avoiding harm to health and livelihoods in the long run. Donors also play a key role as influencers of humanitarian policy and serve an essential function by monitoring and evaluating the extent to which humanitarian programmes are successful, as well as by raising awareness on prominent concerns. They therefore play a crucial role in advancing the sustainability agenda in humanitarian action.



Some possible activities donors could take are listed below.

Through Policy

- ⇒ Address environmental issues from a humanitarian-development nexus perspective
- ⇒ Promote mainstreaming of environmental sustainability in humanitarian policies and practices by:
 - Including environmental considerations in funding mechanisms and/or by aligning sustainable development, climate change and humanitarian funding mechanisms and objectives
- ⇒ Commit to longer-term funding⁸ to support the implementation of environmental policies
- ⇒ Explore innovative financing mechanisms for sustainable solutions, such as forecast-based financing and insurance schemes
- ⇒ Utilize environmental safeguards and benchmarks, see the UN Model Approach⁹
- ⇒ Establish an environmental policy¹⁰ for one's own organization with the purpose of:
 - Preventing and reducing environmental impacts (including going beyond the impacts associated with specific assistance, for example the policy implications of buying unsustainable palm oil for humanitarian food relief)

⁸ Example: The Grand Bargain, an initiative launched by Agenda for Humanity, is an agreement between more than 30 of the biggest donors and aid providers, each making commitments to make aid delivery more efficient, tapping into human and financial resources for the direct benefit of affected populations. Please see: <https://www.agendaforhumanity.org/initiatives/3861>

⁹ <https://unemg.org/modelapproach/>

¹⁰ Following, for example the ISO 14001 requirements

Through Proposals and Projects

- ⇒ Require compliance with international and national government environmental regulations and procedures (where no national legislation exists, best practice should be followed)¹¹
- ⇒ Require that relevant Sphere and technical standards - and associated indicators - for humanitarian assistance are included in proposals, as well as in monitoring and evaluation of projects¹²
- ⇒ Include a section on environmental sustainability in project proposal templates (i.e., the identification of a project's impact and proposed mitigation measures) as well as in project reporting templates
- ⇒ Consider systematically requiring environmental screening / marking / assessment of projects during proposal stage (e.g. using the [Environmental Marker](#) or the [Nexus Environmental Assessment Tool](#))
- ⇒ Advocate the use of environmental impact assessment tools and promote them as standard practice in funded projects (see Resources section)
- ⇒ Require that the results of humanitarian and technical assessments - such as market assessments or energy assessments - be shared openly through humanitarian information sharing platforms¹³
- ⇒ Allow for budgeting of environmental activities into project plans (e.g. costs for energy provision when delivering food, cost for electricity in camps, cost for reforestation, waste management and more)
- ⇒ Consider allowing a certain percentage of project funds to be used for environmental restoration activities - after camp closure or relocation of temporary settlement - or for unforeseen disaster response (for example, allowing a percentage of climate change adaptation project funds to be used for response to unforeseen weather events)



¹¹ For example, the Government of Canada requests NGOs applying for international humanitarian assistance funding to demonstrate their institutional capacity for environmental management, with supporting documentation including environmental policies, strategies, focal points and tools.

¹² See the Shelter and Settlements standard 7 on Environmental Sustainability: <https://handbook.spherestandards.org/en/sphere/#ch008> but note that environmental issues are also included elsewhere in the Sphere standards

¹³ See the note on sharing environmental data in humanitarian action for more information: <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1P0sm6VTrZUcvGw0DqxqrqiPJyLxvhlhiEDQpcSV5v8/edit?usp=sharing>

In Practice

- ⇒ Ensure compliance with policies by including adequate resources for monitoring of environmental impacts of sustainable development and climate change funding streams and humanitarian programmes
- ⇒ Raise staff awareness of existing principles, organizational practices and operational procedures related to environmental sustainability, both at headquarters and field levels
 - Consider making environmental sustainability training mandatory for programme staff
 - Organize webinars and share best practices
- ⇒ Support scaling up of pilot schemes that have proven their feasibility and potential
- ⇒ Nominate an environmental focal point and provide environmental technical support through helpdesks¹⁴
- ⇒ Ask questions during field missions and meetings with implementing partners and beneficiaries, such as:
 - Does your organization have an environmental policy?
 - Is the organization tracking and aiming to minimize its operational and programmatic emissions?
 - Including concrete questions to get a better understanding of the priorities:
 - What are you doing to minimize your fuel costs?
 - How are you managing waste?
 - Do you know which hazardous chemicals are used in your operations?
 - See environmental safeguards for a full list of considerations
- ⇒ Require funded agencies to periodically report on the environmental sustainability of ongoing projects



¹⁴ See for example SIDA helpdesk information here: <https://sidaenvironmenthelpdesk.se/> and information on the Green Recovery helpdesk here: <http://envirodm.org/helpdesk>

On a personal level:

⇒ Complete trainings:

- The 1.5 hour online free Environment and Humanitarian Action training course is available in multiple languages on the Environmental Emergencies Centre (www.eecentre.org)
- The Green Recovery and Reconstruction Training Toolkit for Humanitarian Aid is a training program designed to increase awareness and knowledge of environmentally sustainable disaster response approaches
<https://www.worldwildlife.org/publications/green-recovery-and-reconstruction-toolkit-grrt>

⇒ Join the Environment and Humanitarian Action Network (see below) by contacting the UN Environment Programme / UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs Joint Environment Unit (JEU) on ochaunep@un.org



RESOURCES

More information, studies and reports at global- and country-level, and access to guidelines and toolkits regarding environmental mainstreaming into humanitarian action are available on the various platforms administered by the Joint Environment Unit and its partners:

Websites

- ✦ *EHA Connect* is an online repository of tools and guidance on environment and humanitarian action, aligning with the Humanitarian Programme Cycle and featuring key guidance on thematic clusters and themes:
<https://ehaconnect.org/>
- ✦ *Environmental Emergencies Centre* - The EEC provides users with a one-stop-shop of information relevant to the preparedness, prevention and response stages of an environmental emergency. It includes links to the online trainings and provides all necessary information for the deployment of environmental experts:
www.eecentre.org
- ✦ The *Reliefweb page on Environment and Humanitarian Action* features the latest manuals, guidelines, news and updates posted on Reliefweb and of relevance to environmental sustainability. The page also contains links to useful resources and reports:
<https://reliefweb.int/topics/environment-humanitarian-action>

Networks

- ✦ The *Environment and Humanitarian Action (EHA) Network* is an informal network aiming to avoid, minimize, or mitigate environmental impacts of humanitarian action and to promote environmentally responsible humanitarian programming through collaboration and cooperation. It holds bi-monthly teleconferences and one annual face-to-face meeting. Its particular strength is its unique composition of 100+ members from both environment and humanitarian communities, as well as donors. To join the network, please contact the JEU.
- ✦ The *Bond Development and environment group's (DEG)* goal is to increase understanding of the linkages between poverty and environment, and advocate for policies that support sustainable development and benefit people living in poverty. DEG provides a forum where agencies working at the interface of environmental and poverty issues can exchange information, enhance their analysis, and coordinate their advocacy towards UK Government and other relevant institutions:
<https://www.bond.org.uk/groups/development-and-environment>

Sample tools and guidance

For a full list of assessment tools, tips and guidance, please refer to the EHA Connect webpage on assessments: <https://ehaconnect.org/crisis-response-recovery/assessments/>

✦ *Nexus Environmental Assessment Tool (NEAT+):*

NEAT+ is a simple environmental project-level screening tool for humanitarian contexts, specifically targeted to displacement and rural contexts. It combines environmental data with site-specific and activity-based questions to automatically analyze and flag priority environmental risks:

www.eecentre.org/neat

✦ *Rapid Environmental Assessment (REA)*

The REA is a methodology for rapidly assessing and analyzing the environmental context of a particular crisis or disaster. It has been successfully applied in numerous disasters for more than 20 years and was recently updated to reflect the latest updates to the humanitarian planning process and to mainstream more recent concepts including climate risk, resilience and protection:

<https://www.eecentre.org/2019/05/17/rapid-environmental-assessment-tool-rea/>

✦ *DFID Environmental Guide*

The guide provides advice on planning and managing the environmental appraisal of DFID interventions, and is primarily targeted to DFID staff:

https://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/sites/devco/files/methodology-dfid-guide-to-environmental-screening-200306_en_2.pdf

✦ *Flash Environmental Assessment Tool*

The FEAT identifies existing or potential acute impacts posed by chemical substances. It flags the spatial, human health and environmental impacts of chemical releases and allows disaster responders to take quick action and alleviate human suffering:

<https://www.eecentre.org/resources/feat/>

✦ *Environment Marker*

The environmental marker was originally developed by UNEP and adapted by OCHA in 2014 in an attempt to integrate key environmental considerations into project design for consolidated humanitarian appeals. It has been applied in humanitarian country contexts and corresponds, in part, to the gender and age marker:

<https://wedocs.unep.org/handle/20.500.11822/22138>

Studies

The following studies outline the state of play on environmental mainstreaming in relief operations:

- ✦ *Environment and Humanitarian Action in the age of global reform agendas*, Environment and Humanitarian Action Network, 2017:
<https://unemg.org/images/emgdocs/Dialogues/ND3/Backgroundconcept.pdf>
- ✦ *Environment and Humanitarian Action: Increasing Effectiveness, Sustainability and Accountability*, JEU, 2014:
https://www.unocha.org/sites/unocha/files/EHA%20Study%20webfinal_1.pdf
- ✦ *Environment and Humanitarian Action, Haiti Country study*, JEU 2016:
http://eecentre.org/Modules/EECResources/UploadFile/Attachment/Haiti_EHA_Study_-_20160120.pdf
- ✦ *Environment and Humanitarian Action, Nepal Country study*, JEU 2016:
http://eecentre.org/Modules/EECResources/UploadFile/Attachment/Nepal_EHA_Study_-_20160120.pdf
- ✦ *Environment and Humanitarian Action, Afghanistan Country study*, JEU 2016:
http://www.eecentre.org/Modules/EECResources/UploadFile/Attachment/Afghanistan_EHA_Study_-_20160120.pdf

CONTACT DETAILS

For more information on environment and humanitarian action, to give feedback on the tips and actions suggested or to provide additional information on best practices and tools, do not hesitate to contact the UNEP / OCHA Joint Environment Unit (JEU)

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@EnvironmentOcha

The JEU responds as one UN to the environmental dimensions of emergencies. The partnership assists countries affected by disasters and crises and works to enhance the sustainability of humanitarian action.