



**The International Development and Environment Nexus: Greening  
Humanitarian Interventions**

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**Abstract:** Mainstreaming the environment in humanitarian interventions has become crucial today, resulting from the direct and indirect impacts of climate change across the globe. Conflicts, emergencies, and disasters affect the environment in ways that influence the health, livelihoods, and long-term vulnerability of people and regions. This paper will explore the intersectionality between international development and the environment. It will highlight the various ways in which the environment can be mainstreamed in humanitarian interventions. This work will also discuss the benefits and limitations of greening humanitarian operations and will identify some tools and resources that can be employed in greening international development efforts.

Humanitarian efforts are often geared towards people dwelling in poverty and victims of natural or man-made disasters. The underserved population is heavily reliant on the environment because of their direct usage of natural resources-land, air, and water. Consequently, environmental pollution or degradation in the face and aftermath of a disaster is detrimental to the vulnerable population. Given these circumstances, there is a need to integrate environmental considerations in humanitarian assistance. The practice of greening humanitarian interventions from the planning phase to relief and recovery ensures the delivery of sustainable solutions and generates long-term positive outcomes in partner countries. The COVID-19 pandemic has also reinforced the need for the non-profit sector to enlarge its capacity to innovate sustainable and long-term development assistance.

### **International Development and The Environment**

According to the 2018 Global Humanitarian Assistance report, approximately 201 million people in 134 countries required international humanitarian assistance in 2017. A fifth of the population requiring assistance were located in Syria, Yemen, and Turkey. 60% of total humanitarian assistance was directed towards ten countries, with 14% of assistance going to Syria, and 8% going to Yemen.<sup>1</sup>

The intersectionality between poverty, fragility, and environmental vulnerability is a complex one that offers a significant opportunity for development workers and initiatives to integrate environmental considerations in their policies and practices. Development Initiatives reports that 59% of the 753 million people living in extreme poverty reside in countries impacted by environmental vulnerability, fragility, or both. Moreover, international humanitarian

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<sup>1</sup> “Global Humanitarian Assistance Report 2018 - World,” ReliefWeb, 10, <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/global-humanitarian-assistance-report-2018>.

interventions maintain a principal and crucial role in meeting people's needs during a disaster or crisis.

Walch, a researcher and experienced humanitarian worker at the International Committee of the Red Cross, argues that humanitarian responses that inadequately integrate environmental considerations pose the risk of inciting long-term harm; by negatively influencing the health, livelihoods, biosphere, and natural habitats in which people reside.<sup>2</sup> The nexus between humanitarian operations and the environment is constructed by the continuum of responses, such as, whether humanitarian assistance is immediate or long-term. In practice, the term "humanitarian" includes not only immediate assistance but also a broad array of post-crisis supports throughout the recovery process. Further, some decisions taken in the process of providing humanitarian support can result in negative environmental impacts long after the primary decision-makers have left the partner countries requiring assistance.<sup>3</sup>

### **The Significance of the Environment to the Poor**

Integrating environmental considerations in humanitarian assistance is crucial for many reasons. The United Kingdom's Department for International Development (DFID) posits that the environment is important to people dwelling in poverty because they are often directly dependent on the environment for survival. Further, this population is mostly affected by the challenges of environmental degradation or limited access to natural resources in comparison to

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<sup>2</sup> Amy Johnson et al., "No Plan B: The Importance of Environmental Considerations in Humanitarian Contexts - An Analysis of Tools, Policies, and Commitments of DEC Members - World," ReliefWeb, 2020, 4, <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/no-plan-b-importance-environmental-considerations-humanitarian-contexts-analysis-tools>.

<sup>3</sup> Kelly Charles, "Mainstreaming Environment into Humanitarian Interventions – A Synopsis of Key Organizations, Literature and Experience," GOV.UK (GOV.UK, January 1, 2013): 1, <https://www.gov.uk/research-for-development-outputs/mainstreaming-environment-into-humanitarian-interventions-a-synopsis-of-key-organisations-literature-and-experience>.

others.<sup>4</sup> The environmental degradation of the Lake Chad basin, along with irrigation projects and the unsustainable use of the water resources has led to the depletion of water in Chad. Consequently, the livelihood of pastoralists, fishermen, and farmers who live in Chad, Niger, Cameroon, and Nigeria has been negatively impacted.<sup>5</sup>

Not only is the livelihood of the underserved impacted by climate change, the health and vulnerability of this population are also negatively influenced by environmental degradation. The Department for International Development, UK (DFID) reports that about 30% of the disease burden in Sub-Saharan Africa is a resultant effect of environmental causes including: poor access to clean water and sanitation, a reduction in air quality, and precarious working conditions.<sup>6</sup> What is more, people dwelling in poverty are more exposed to environmental hazards and conflicts with limitations in their capacity to cope when disasters occur.

### **Mainstreaming the Environment in Humanitarian Interventions**

Relief and recovery operations in the aftermath of conflicts or disasters can sometimes negatively impact the environment to the same degree as the disasters themselves.<sup>7</sup> By the same token, unsustainable humanitarian assistance measures can result in further environmental degradation and over-exploitation of natural resources in affected regions. For example, the excessive drilling of water resources needed by humanitarian agencies led to the drying up of wells in Afghanistan.<sup>8</sup> Also, the over-supply of fishing boats during humanitarian relief

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<sup>4</sup> “Environment Guide, a Guide to Environmental Screening, DFID, U.K, 2003 <https://europa.eu/capacity4dev/public-environment-climate/documents/environment-guide-environmental-screening-dfid-2003>.

<sup>5</sup> Freedom Onuoha, “Environmental Degradation, Livelihood and Conflicts,” ACCORD, February 10, 2020, <https://www.accord.org.za/ajcr-issues/environmental-degradation-livelihood-and-conflicts/>.

<sup>6</sup> “Environment Guide,” 2.

<sup>7</sup> Tom Delrue and Renard Sexton, “Mainstreaming the Environment into Humanitarian Action,” Humanitarian Aid on the move, 2009, [https://postconflict.unep.ch/humanitarianaction/documents/01\\_01-04.pdf](https://postconflict.unep.ch/humanitarianaction/documents/01_01-04.pdf).

<sup>8</sup> “Environment and Humanitarian Action: Increasing Effectiveness, Sustainability and Accountability: A Study Undertaken for the Joint UNEP/OCHA Environment Unit,” 2014, [https://www.unocha.org/sites/unocha/files/EHA%20Study%20webfinal\\_1.pdf](https://www.unocha.org/sites/unocha/files/EHA%20Study%20webfinal_1.pdf).

operations in Post-Tsunami Sri Lanka led to the depletion of fish within the region. Not to mention, the largest outbreak of Cholera in Haiti resulted from environmental pollution and the inability of humanitarian agencies to comply with waste treatment standards.<sup>9</sup> Notwithstanding, mainstreaming climate action in humanitarian assistance can be done in the various phases of relief interventions, from the planning stage to the relief and recovery phase of assistance. Other screening efforts could include greening the internal policy framework and daily operations of Civil Service Organizations that provide humanitarian assistance in partner countries.

Integrating environmental considerations in humanitarian interventions entails recognizing and harnessing environmental opportunities in a sustainable way. This can include the use of a screening note which incorporates environmental services like water or waste management in local contexts. Furthermore, it may involve the assessing and managing the environmental threats related to the intervention, to ensure that the proper measures are being taken.<sup>10</sup>

### **Benefits of Integrating the Environment in Humanitarian interventions**

The attainment of sustainable solutions is a major outcome of humanitarian responses that consider the environment. Environmental mainstreaming in development operations reduces vulnerability, disaster risk, and conflict in interventions.<sup>11</sup> Water, land, fuel, wood, and other natural resources are often employed during interventions. A primary assessment of these resources and their most suitable use allows for sustainability in both short and long-term periods.<sup>12</sup> For instance, situating refugee camps in safe sites with the provision of

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<sup>9</sup> “Environment and Humanitarian Action,” 6.

<sup>10</sup> “Environment Guide,” 7.

<sup>11</sup> “Environment and Humanitarian Action,” 18.

<sup>12</sup> Eamonn Barrett, Sarah Murfitt, and Paul Venton, “Mainstreaming Environment into Humanitarian Interventions – A Synopsis of Key Organisations, Literature and Experience,” GOV.UK (GOV.UK, January 1, 2013), <https://www.gdrc.org/uem/disasters/disenvi/erm-meha.pdf>.

energy-efficient resources like cookstoves and solar lanterns can serve as a way of mitigating air pollution and promoting climate action within refugee camps. The use of fuel-efficient stoves has been promoted within IDP camps in Somalia, this in turn has resulted in reduced levels of air pollution in the region.



Fuel efficient stoves, Somalia

(Source: UNEP & OCHA report, 2014)

Screening the environment in humanitarian interventions mitigates negative impacts resulting from the incorporation of best practices in the response planning phase. To illustrate, Darfur's conflicts have resulted in mass internal displacement and over-concentration of the population in camps, with victims competing for the limited natural resources available within the region. Tearfund's Sustainable Resource Management (SRM), has been recommended as a suitable policy framework for implementation in the relief planning and delivery phase. The SRM will ensure that resources are efficiently managed in keeping with the limitations of renewable supplies.<sup>13</sup>

Environmental considerations in humanitarian interventions reduce the aggregate cost of disasters and risks in the long run. Although humanitarian interventions are always focused on

<sup>13</sup> Tearfund, "Sudan: Darfur - Water Supply in a Vulnerable Environment - Sudan," ReliefWeb, 2007, <https://reliefweb.int/report/sudan/sudan-darfur-water-supply-vulnerable-environment>.

providing immediate short-term assistance, having a medium-term or long-term approach to interventions increases resilience and improves the capacity to reduce the effects of disaster through sustainable management.<sup>14</sup> More importantly, environmental screening in interventions allows for a safer and more viable social, economic, and human rehabilitation, long after the humanitarian interventions are concluded. In essence, good relief should not only focus on short-term assistance but should establish foundations for future recovery and development.<sup>15</sup>

### **Barriers to Greening Humanitarian Operations**

A myriad of factors impedes the successful screening of the environment in humanitarian operations at different levels. Primarily, development practitioners and humanitarian organizations minimize the impact of their relief operation activities on the environment.<sup>16</sup> What is more, in the face of disaster or emergency, concern and priority is often given to human safety and security, with less focus on the environment. This negligence is however problematic because human survival in the subsequent periods following a disaster is based on the availability of natural resources within the region. The mismanagement or unsustainable use of these resources, therefore, poses a challenge of sustenance on the livelihoods of the affected population. For instance, regarding camp shelters, deforestation and unsustainable use of wood and timber for construction purposes in humanitarian operations leads to further environmental degradation and increases the risks and exposure to floods and other natural disasters.

Secondly, more often than not, the poor coordination and inadequate management of displacement camps impede the greening of humanitarian interventions. Delrue and Sexton (2009)- a humanitarian affairs officer at the United Nations and Political scientist respectively, suggest that displacement camps are constructed out of short-term needs but usually endure for

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<sup>14</sup> "Environment and Humanitarian Action."

<sup>15</sup> Barrett et al., "Mainstreaming Environment," 1.

<sup>16</sup> Delrue and Sexton, "Mainstreaming the Environment into Humanitarian Action", 1.

several years. The over-concentration of refugees in Darfur's Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camps has resulted in the exhaustion of about twelve to fifteen boreholes out of sixty-six that were drilled. Further, the IDP camps are often situated on the town outskirts, leading to uncurbed deforestation, overgrazing, and the demolition of shelterbelts.<sup>17</sup> Toilets and latrines present in the shelter sites for refugees in Port-au-Prince, Haiti intervention, heightened the risk of infectious diseases during the emergency.

The mismanagement of waste, particularly the improper disposal of fuel, chemicals, medicines, debris, and even carcasses within the camps also greatly contribute to the degradation of the environment.<sup>18</sup>

Thirdly, internal policy statements, processes, commitments, and tools which should guide the sustainable humanitarian operations of development workers and initiatives are lacking in humanitarian agencies. The tools are also perceived to be complex and cumbersome in time of implementation.<sup>19</sup> In the case where the policies and tools are available, donor countries tend to show more commitment to green operations than in partner countries where assistance is being provided.<sup>20</sup> Further, the system or framework of indicators for monitoring and evaluating the environmental impacts during field operations is lacking.<sup>21</sup> Finally, insufficient funding allocated to climate action in all phases of the humanitarian intervention program cycle may impede the efforts of greening humanitarian operations.

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<sup>17</sup> Brendan Bromwich, "Environmental Degradation and Conflict in Darfur: Implications for Peace and Recovery," Humanitarian Practice Network, 2008, <https://odihpn.org/magazine/environmental-degradation-and-conflict-in-darfur-implications-for-peace-and-recovery/>

<sup>18</sup> "Environment and Humanitarian Action," 10.

<sup>19</sup> Barrett et al., "Mainstreaming Environment," 16.

<sup>20</sup> See note 2 above, 5.

<sup>21</sup> "Environment and Humanitarian Action," 23.

## Overcoming the Challenges to Greening Humanitarian Operations

Prioritizing the environment from the planning phase by incorporating best practices for humanitarian operations is a good starting point to promote environmental mainstreaming. Some challenges to greening humanitarian operations require minor adaptations to mitigate the environmental impact of humanitarian assistance, such as by purchasing fair trade products or recyclable materials to reduce waste and pollution. However, the majority of challenges require significant obligations for sustainable outcomes.

More importantly, a shift in paradigm in terms of operational policies from a short-term approach of intervention to a long-term perspective is required to guide the decision making of agencies, donors, and development workers offering assistance. The acknowledgment that human needs and dependencies on the environment will persist long after the end of relief or recovery should guide humanitarian operations.<sup>22</sup>

Secondly, sustainable financing in the face and aftermath of an emergency is a significant way of ensuring environmental stewardship and sustainability. Green financing includes investment in renewable energies, climate change adaptation, energy efficiency, water sanitation, biodiversity protection, waste processing, and recycling.<sup>23</sup> The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), launched its global Safe Access to Fuel and Energy (SAFE) strategy in 2014. The SAFE strategy, as the name implies- aims to improve refugees' safe access to fuel and energy for cooking and lighting for security at night. This strategy focused on ten priority countries

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<sup>22</sup> Delrue and Sexton, "Mainstreaming the Environment," 4.

<sup>23</sup> Nannette Lindeberg, "Definition of Green Finance - DIE\_GDI," 2014, [https://www.die-gdi.de/uploads/media/Lindenbergs\\_Definition\\_green\\_finance.pdf](https://www.die-gdi.de/uploads/media/Lindenbergs_Definition_green_finance.pdf).

including; Bangladesh, Burkina Faso, Chad, Ethiopia, Jordan, Kenya, Nepal, Rwanda, Sudan, and Uganda.<sup>24</sup>

Refugee engagement in environmental protection activities is another effective way of maintaining ownership, accountability, resilience, and reducing climate risk. In Dar Es Salaam, Tanzania, refugees engaged in seed planting activities around the 14 refugee camps within the region, in celebration of the UN's World Environment Day.<sup>25</sup>

Lastly, an evaluation of available tools and resources for greening international development efforts, as well as their implementation mechanisms under the UNHCR core standards is essential in greening humanitarian assistance. In addition, enhancing the training and capacity development of humanitarian workers and local agencies to mainstream these tools within operations will promote environmental protection.

### **Tools and Resources for Greening Humanitarian Action**

The Department for International Development (DFID) UK, highlights the importance of Environmental analysis, Environmental Impact Assessments (EIA), Environmental audits, as well as Strategic Environmental Assessments (SEA) within humanitarian operations. An environmental analysis is carried out to identify specific issues in a field study, as well as to determine environmental inputs in project related documentation. An Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA), on the other hand, entails an in-depth and comprehensive study of the projected critical interactions between humanitarian action and the environment within which the intervention will occur.

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<sup>24</sup> Leo Dobbs, "UNHCR Launches Global Safe Energy Strategy to Benefit Millions," UNHCR, 2014, <https://www.unhcr.org/news/latest/2014/5/537250486/unhcr-launches-global-safe-energy-strategy-benefit-millions.html>.

<sup>25</sup> Jennifer Clark, "UNHCR Roots for World Environment Day," UNHCR, 2003, <https://www.unhcr.org/search?skip=0&docid=&query=tenders>; Hujale Moulid, "The Best Way to Achieve Sustainable Energy for Refugees is to Make Them Partners and Not Just Recipients." UNHCR Innovation, 2015, <https://www.unhcr.org/innovation/the-best-way-to-achieve-sustainable-energy-for-refugees-is-to-make-them-partners-and-not-just-recipients/>.

An environmental audit follows the same procedure as an Environmental Impact Assessment but applies to ongoing projects as opposed to newly developed endeavors. A Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA), by the same token, is used to examine the positive and negative environmental implications of proposed policies and course of action. The SEA may include a cost-benefit analysis of policy choices.<sup>26</sup>

The Rapid Environmental Assessment (REA) is an adaption of the Environmental Impact Assessment, specifically for emergency responses, with information gathered from a wide range of sources. The scope of the Rapid Environmental Assessment may include an appraisal of the overall context of a disaster, imminent environmental effects of disaster agents, and possible negative environmental impacts of relief interventions.<sup>27</sup>

### **The Core Humanitarian Standard on Quality and Accountability (CHS)**

The Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS) on quality and accountability establishes nine commitments that can be adopted by organizations and individuals that deliver humanitarian assistance. The Core Standard can be implemented to enhance the quality and effectiveness of the relief provided.<sup>28</sup> At the center of the Core Standard lies the communities and people affected by the crisis.

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<sup>26</sup> “Environment and Humanitarian Action,” 34.

<sup>27</sup> Barrett et al., “Mainstreaming Environment,” 18.

<sup>28</sup> “Core Humanitarian Standard on Quality and Accountability,” 2014, 4,  
<https://corehumanitarianstandard.org/files/files/Core%20Humanitarian%20Standard%20-%20English.pdf>.



Source: [corehumanitarianstandard.org](http://corehumanitarianstandard.org), 2014

## The Sphere Handbook

The Sphere handbook is a recognized and widely accepted tool which guides and ensures the delivery of quality and principled humanitarian efforts. Developed by a collaboration of UN agencies, the International Red Cross, and the Red Crescent movement, the Sphere handbooks comprises the Humanitarian Charter, protection principles, the Core Humanitarian Standard, and the minimum standards in disaster response. The Sphere handbook also includes four technical chapters that identify minimum standards in the primary response sectors. These include: Water Supply, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH), Food security and nutrition, Shelter and settlement, and Health.<sup>29</sup>

## Conclusion

In conclusion, integrating the environment in humanitarian assistance is a complex and multifaceted process that should take into account the local context and regional specifics in which assistance is being provided. Dealing with the environmental challenges that confront

<sup>29</sup> “The Handbook Editions and Languages: Sphere Standards,” Sphere, 2018, <https://spherestandards.org/handbook/editions/>.

those dwelling in poverty is crucial in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals and long-term poverty reduction. Greening humanitarian interventions from the planning phase to relief and recovery, ensures environmental protection, risk and vulnerability reduction, the delivery of sustainable solutions, and long-term positive outcomes in partner countries.

Responsible resource management, sustainable financing of humanitarian operations, refugee engagement in environmental protection and, proper disposal of waste generated from refugee camps are significant ways to reduce environmental degradation in international development efforts. The implementation of green tools and resources in humanitarian operations, extensive environmental analysis, audits, and impact assessments, while enhancing the training and capacity development of local agencies and development workers is also instrumental in producing a sustainable change in humanitarian interventions. In essence, good relief should view the environment as a development concern, have a long-term focus of providing immediate assistance to victims of disaster and conflict, while enhancing sustainable recovery and rehabilitation.

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