

Proposed theme: Integrating the environment into humanitarian action – enhancing collaboration among the humanitarian and environmental sectors

Background, context and existing initiatives

Until now there has been little consistency in approach, commitment or allocation of resources to address the environmental impact of emergency and humanitarian operations. While the Humanitarian Review of 2005 designated environment as one of the four major cross-cutting humanitarian issues, several IASC real-time evaluations acknowledged that the environment is neglected and not sufficiently integrated into humanitarian response. The failure to take the environment into account during humanitarian response planning has manifested itself in many different ways across various crisis situations and countries. For instance it resulted in deforestation as a result of brick production for humanitarian operations in Darfur; dried up wells due to over-drilling for water by humanitarian organisations in Afghanistan; fishing stock depletion in post-Tsunami Sri Lanka following an over-provisioning of fishing boats; or failure to meet waste treatment standards leading to environmental contamination in Haiti and the largest outbreak of cholera in recent history.

While efforts are undertaken to mainstream environmental considerations, these are ad hoc, remain project focused and limited in time and budget. They are often small-scale projects of a pilot nature and thus perceived as innovation as opposed to standard best practice. In addition, they are often expected to demonstrate relevance or deliver evidence of feasibility.

Ultimately, a new way of working is needed, which would entail a low-emission and low-impact humanitarian assistance system to support climate and disaster resilient recovery and development. An informal network on the theme of Environment and Humanitarian Action, coordinated by the UN Environment/OCHA Joint Unit (JEU) brings together a number of experts. However, a more formal setting is required in order for this topic to achieve system-wide transformation. It is proposed that the Environment Management Group establish a UN-wide coordination process to engage humanitarian agencies in dialogue and cooperation with other agencies, such as those having an environmental mandate.

UN wide dimensions

Environmental fragility is directly linked to populations' resilience to withstand shocks. The mismanagement of natural resources can thus act as "threat multiplier" in exacerbating conflict, which may in turn lead to internal or cross-border movements (eg. Somalia in 2017). This makes the integration of environmental considerations and sustainable practices into humanitarian response planning directly relevant to the Secretary General's focus area of ensuring peace and security globally. In addition, the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants also broached the issue of large population movements and their impacts on the environment and called for the provision of "assistance to protect the environment and strengthen infrastructure affected by large movements of refugees in host countries". The topic is further in line with the commitments made at the World Humanitarian Summit (WHS) in 2016 to leave no one behind and to increasingly localize humanitarian assistance. The local environment is also a natural entry point to bridge the divide between humanitarian and development work, another WHS commitment. Successfully addressing this issue moreover contributes to the achievement of several of the Sustainable Development Goals, including SDG 1 on ending poverty in all its forms everywhere, SDG 3 on ensuring healthy lives, SDG 6 on clean water and sanitation, SDG 11 on sustainable cities and communities as well as SDG 12 on responsible consumption and production. It further relates to a number of UNEA resolutions such as 1/5 (Chemicals and waste), UNEA 2 resolutions 2/3 (Investing in human capacity), 2/5 (Delivering on 2030 Agenda), 2/7 (Sound management of chemicals and waste), 2/8 (Sustainable consumption and production), 2/15 (Environmental protection during times of armed conflict). Lastly, the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction recognizes the role of sustainable ecosystem management in building resilience to disasters and climate change and articulates "Build Back Better" in recovery, rehabilitation and reconstruction as one of its priorities.

Possible contribution of the EMG and proposed specific deliverables

The Environment Management Group (EMG), as the United Nations System-wide coordination body on environment and human settlements, is well positioned to elevate the issue of environment and humanitarian

action to a higher level as efforts to integrate environment continue at a local level and across responses. The first of the EMG Nexus Dialogues (26-27 April 2017) already addressed the topic in a break-out group which highlighted the need for enhanced collaboration and action on a number of specific points. Such desirable actions include: (i) a mapping of mechanisms, tools and actors that are currently used for or involved in the integration of environmental considerations into humanitarian action; (ii) the assessment of the impacts of humanitarian work and related costs so as to produce a baseline (footprint) that would then guide mitigation efforts and could be used to make the business case for the integration of environment; (iii) the building of high-level support and advocacy for the issue, through the establishment of a UN-wide coordination process which would be facilitated by the EMG secretariat and could take the form of an Issue Management Group, a forum for Inter-agency discussions or similar. This coordination process would then also ensure that the relevant organisations in the humanitarian and environment sectors collaborate and share expertise at the policy and programme level.

Modalities of operation

It is proposed that the topic of Environment and Humanitarian Action will be the theme of the next Nexus Dialogue in June 2017 which will then serve as a forum to further define the scope, specific objectives and deliverables as well as the form and modalities of operation of the above proposed UN-wide coordination process. It is further proposed that these discussions build on the success of the Issue Management Group on Environmental Sustainability Management and related best practices.