

Proposal:

Establishment of the IASC Reference Group for Environment and Humanitarian Action

An IASC Reference Group on Environment and Humanitarian Action will support the IASC in improving the effectiveness of humanitarian action by coordinating activities in the field of environmental mainstreaming, undertaking collective action, providing guidance, sharing resources and knowledge.

Why Environment and Humanitarian Action?

- Destruction of livelihoods and 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;
- Environmental degradation and conflict between displaced and local population caused by the reliance on wood fuel for cooking energy needs in Dadaab Refugee Camp, Kenya;
- Ruined livelihoods from an over-provision of fishing boats and consequent fishing stock depletion in post-Tsunami Sri Lanka;
- Failure to meet waste treatment standards leading to environmental contamination in Haiti and the largest outbreak of cholera in recent history.



These examples illustrate how humanitarian or peacekeeping actors, by failing to properly take environmental issues into consideration, can inadvertently **undermine their purpose**: to save lives and preserve and restore livelihoods¹; they have done harm contrary to the unifying guiding principle of humanitarian action. However, for some clusters (e.g., Emergency Shelter and WASH) good examples for the integration of environmental issues exist and should be built upon. Ensuring that environmental considerations are taken into account at the earliest possible moment of humanitarian action does make a difference – for those who need it most.

Why a Reference Group?

Environment as IASC cross-cutting theme

The Humanitarian Review of 2005 designated environment as one of the four major cross-cutting humanitarian issues. Whereas it is clearly stated that the implementation of such issues can improve the quality of humanitarian assistance², several IASC real-time evaluations acknowledged that they are neglected and not integrated into humanitarian response.

The cluster approach, together with the 2012 IASC Transformative Agenda, were seen as opportunities to integrate cross-cutting issues, including environment. However an independent study³ commissioned by OCHA found that there appears to be little, if any, consistency in approach, commitment or allocation of resources to address these environmental issues by the clusters, humanitarian country teams and donors at the international and local levels. As this publication noted "... a growing body of evidence confirms that the subjects, themes and approaches generally termed cross-cutting... are not adequately – and often not at all – reflected in the way humanitarians plan and execute their operations"⁴. At the same time, humanitarian experts cite climate change and environmental factors as the single most important issues that will increase vulnerability in the future.

Environment and Humanitarian Action Network

Joined by the common goal to maximize the outcomes of humanitarian action an informal group of like-minded practitioners convened for the first time in 2013. The group aims to avoid, minimize, or mitigate environmental impacts and to promote environmentally responsible humanitarian programming through collaboration and cooperation. It operates as the Environment & Humanitarian Action (EHA) Network, coordinated by the Joint UNEP/OCHA Environment Unit. Currently, the network holds bi-monthly teleconferences to exchange information on projects and activities and identify areas of potential cooperation. Most recently, the cooperation as part of the network had resulted in the formation of a subgroup on hazardous waste management. The group's collaboration with the London School of Economics and Political Science culminated in the report "Hazardous Waste in Humanitarian Crises"⁵. Other examples include the 2014 publication "Environment and Humanitarian Action - Increasing Effectiveness, Sustainability and Accountability" to which many of the network's members contributed.

The particular strength of the EHA network is its unique composition⁶ as it consists of representatives from both environment and humanitarian communities as well as donors. Through the Joint UNEP/OCHA Environment Unit, the group is furthermore linked to the UN Environment Programme, which is the leading global environment authority but, and significantly, is not an operational humanitarian organization.

The establishment of an IASC Reference Group on Environment and Humanitarian Action

The establishment of a Reference Group on Environment and Humanitarian Action would thus provide the IASC with balanced and practical guidance and support to implement the IASC work plan without compromising the natural resource base that local and displaced populations depend on in post-disaster and post-conflict scenarios. It would furthermore institutionalize and strengthen the cross-cutting theme of 'environment' as part of the humanitarian architecture, thereby creating an accountability mechanism for its effective integration that is currently lacking as no entity is tasked with the monitoring of the success of the proposed integration efforts outlined in the 2012 Transformative Agenda.

The Reference Group would be co-chaired by the Norwegian Refugee Council and the Joint UNEP/OCHA Environment Unit.

What would the Reference Group do?

Due to the nature of cross-cutting issues, the activities of the Reference Group will deliver against all four priorities of the IASC Working Group, with its main focus being on the effective response to emergencies and protracted crises. The Reference Group will be established for an initial limited duration until mid-2019 to coincide with the 3rd Environment and Emergencies Forum.⁷ The Reference Group will focus on developing country and context-specific guidance material for (inter-)cluster coordinators, Resident/Humanitarian Coordinators, and implementing partners (including donors), supported by the provision of technical support and training as/when required. The Reference Group will also be able to provide inputs on the inclusion of environmental factors into other IASC documentation and reports as requested, and coordinate and support relevant post-WHS commitments to actions related to environment. The Reference Group may also commission studies and advocacy materials to strengthen their evidence-base, including for example on cost-benefit analysis of environmental mainstreaming.

The Environment and Humanitarian Action network has been liaising closely with the Safe Access to Fuel and Energy (SAFE) working group and, due to the apparent connectedness of the issues, will continue its close collaboration. The Group will also seek collaboration opportunities with a number of Task Teams and other Reference Groups working on matters that are relevant for the better integration of environment into the humanitarian response. Such groups could include the RG on Early Warning and Preparedness as well as the Task Team on Humanitarian Financing.

A detailed work plan will be drafted upon approval of this proposal.

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¹ Environment and Humanitarian Action: Increasing Effectiveness, Sustainability and Accountability (2014), Joint UNEP/OCHA Environment Unit.

² Cluster Approach Evaluation 2, Synthesis Report, IASC, 2010, p. 56.

³ OCHA, 2014, Saving Lives Today and Tomorrow: Managing the Risk of Humanitarian Crises.

⁴ Coordination and Funding of Cross-cutting Issues in Humanitarian Action, Calvi-Pariseti, P. 2013.

⁵ LSE, 2016, Hazardous Waste in Humanitarian Crises.

⁶ CEFREPADE, DfID, FAO, FOI, Groupe URD, ICRC, IFRC, MSB, NRC, OCHA, Oxfam UK, ProAct Network, SAFE Network, SDC, Swedish Red Cross, UNDP/Early Recovery Network, UNEP, UNHCR, UNICEF, USAID, WFP and WWF-USA.

⁷ The EEF is a unique biannual forum, organized by OCHA and UNEP. It brings together disaster managers, environmental and humanitarian experts. The next EEF will take place in June 2017, in Nairobi, Kenya.