
Further Integrating the Environment and Humanitarian Action;

A discussion paper

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Inspired by the Environment in Emergencies Forum 2015 in Oslo a discussion has emerged on how to better embed the environment into humanitarian action. While policy and logic demand this, practice has been slow in evolving, to the detriment of disaster survivors. A 2014 report produced by UNEP/OCHA¹ clearly and explicitly discusses the impact of what a reduced focus on environmental issues has on effective and quality humanitarian programming and offers concise, deliverable and targeted recommendations that would help to resolve this issue.

However it is not clear if these recommendations are being acted upon and furthermore co-ordinated environmental representation still remains largely absent from any integration into humanitarian responses.

This discussion paper has been developed in order to gauge the opinion of practitioners in the humanitarian and development community and to develop a response to three 'action points'.

- To develop action on a more formalised environmental representation in order to embed environmental expertise within the formal humanitarian architecture. Accomplishing this requires extensive and broad cross-sector discussions. But the core approach would be to take a page from the Global Protection Cluster and learn from the experiences of that cluster: Formalised environmental representation would operate both as a unifying cross-cutting focal point for environmental issues but also focus on environment-humanitarian-development issues across all clusters in ways which support specific-cluster results.
- To advocate the OCHA/UNEP 'Joint Environment Unit' (JEU) to take ownership of this issue and lead the development of a strategy to improve humanitarian-environment integration with the active engagement of the EHA (Environment in Humanitarian Action) Reference Group, and to move these points forward in a time-bound and focused manner. The World Humanitarian Summit in June 2016 represents an effective position for engagement.

- To proactively engage key donors (e.g., UK, Norway, EU, US, Switzerland, Sweden, Japan, Qatar) on the importance of environmental issues critical to reducing risk and vulnerability, in support of this initiative and for a more clear and consistent application of donor requirements to consider environment as key to effectively responding to critical humanitarian needs.

Why is this needed? This paper considers that the environment and humanitarian 'sectors' are largely seen as separate and unrelated, despite increasing evidence that they overlap to a considerable degree. Indeed under the humanitarian guiding principle of 'do no harm' they are complimentary; a safe and secure living environment can only exist if the quality of the physical environment can sustain it.

The UNEP/OCHA study provides a resounding call for the need for change. Taking as its basis the issue of humanitarian responsibility the study offers recommendations for establishing points of entry for environmental issues, the need for targeted and relevant impact assessment and the role donors play in creating the enabling landscape for environmental issues to be 'mainstreamed' into activities. The comprehensive nature of the report and its strong focus on engagement means that there is a mark of credibility to the findings and allow us to 'draw a line' about the state of environmental issues in the humanitarian sector.

Findings within the report indicate that despite recognition of the links between environment and humanitarian response among humanitarian practitioners and despite a host of quality initiatives, standards and guidelines, there is a **wide gap between policy and practice and a clear lack of accountability and responsibility** in ensuring that this gap is bridged and that theory is transformed into practical action.

In short - everyone seems to know that something needs to be done but no-one really knows what this something is, and then how to action, monitor and control it.

¹ UNEP/OCHA Joint Environment Unit, Environment and Humanitarian Action, Increasing effectiveness, sustainability and accountability, 2014

To practitioners in the humanitarian and development community focused on environmental issues, this seems strange and paradoxical. Whilst there is almost universal acknowledgement that environmental degradation exacerbates risk, stalls effective recovery (and prevents sustainable development), it seems that the priority for action remains elsewhere, and falls to someone else. Unlike other cross cutting issues – notably gender and protection – environment seems to remain on the side-lines, at times rising to brief prominence only to fade rapidly away.

Attempts have been made to address the challenge. Most notably with the development of the cluster approach, which together with the 2012 IASC Transformative Agenda, were seen as opportunities to integrate what are commonly referred to as “cross-cutting issues”, of which environment is one.

The OCHA study found that there appears to be little if any consistency in approach, commitment and dedicated resources to these issues by the clusters, by humanitarian country teams and by donors at the international and local levels, “...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”

Thus, although environment has been singled out for priority attention as part of the 2005 Humanitarian Reform, there is little evidence of political and financial support to this at the global or operational level in any systematic way.

The UNEP/OCHA Joint Environment Unit (JEU)

Following a review of these conclusions, in consultation with a group of environmentally conscious NGOs, the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) assumed responsibility for environmental issues within the IASC. In November 2011, UNEP asked the Joint UNEP/OCHA Environment Unit (JEU) to support with implementing and operationalising cross cutting humanitarian issues of environment. UNEP and OCHA have now (2014) agreed to jointly implement a new environment in humanitarian action strategy.

There are signs that the JEU has gained some traction. The appointment of environmental co-ordinators in regions across the globe, country assessment of environmental ‘capacity’, regular meetings of an environment reference group are all strong signs of movement. However there continues to be a significant shortfall in co-ordinated and accessible representation of environmental issues in humanitarian responses, to the detriment of disaster survivors.

Until the overlaps and synergies between humanitarian and environmental sectors are more clearly understood and used by the organizations which occupy these spaces, disaster survivors will face continued unnecessary suffering as well as risk of a future disaster; and the humanitarian enterprise not meet its full potential.

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