

IASC Guidance

ENVIRONMENTAL RESPONSIBILITY IN HUMANITARIAN OPERATIONS

September 2023

Endorsed by IASC OPAG

Acknowledgements

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Background

At the United Nations (UN) Executive Committee meeting on 29 May 2020, following a recognition of the need to improve environmental responsibility across humanitarian and emergency response, the UN Secretary-General requested “OCHA, with the participation of UNEP, to organize a working group under the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) to offer guidance and lessons learned for improving environmental responsibility in UN emergency and humanitarian operations.” On 29 October 2020, the Operational Policy and Advocacy Group (OPAG) of the IASC decided for the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) to, in collaboration with the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and in consultation with the OPAG, establish an informal Working Group on this topic. Consequently, an Informal Working Group on Environmental Responsibility in Humanitarian Operations was established, under the chairmanship of the UNEP/OCHA Joint Environment Unit (JEU), with the participation of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the Catholic Agency for Overseas Development (CAFOD), the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the World Food Programme (WFP). The Informal Working Group oversaw the development of the guidance.

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Acronyms and abbreviations

CEB	United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination
CHS	Core Humanitarian Standard on Quality and Accountability
DFID	Department for International Development (United Kingdom)
DG ECHO	Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations
EEC	Environmental Emergencies Centre
EHA	environment and humanitarian action
EHAN	Environment and Humanitarian Action Network
EMS	environmental management system
FEBA	Friends of Ecosystem-based Adaptation
FCDO	Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office of the United Kingdom
IASC	Inter-Agency Standing Committee
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
ICT	information and communications technology
ICVA	International Council of Voluntary Agencies
IFRC	International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies
IOM	International Organization for Migration
ISO	International Organization for Standardization
MOOC	Massive Open Online Course
MSF	Médecins Sans Frontières
NbS	Nature-based Solutions
NEAT+	Nexus Environmental Assessment Tool
OCHA	Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
PEDRR	Partnership for Environment and Disaster Risk Reduction
PHAP	Professionals in Humanitarian Assistance and Protection
Sida	Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency
UNDAC	United Nations Disaster Assessment and Coordination Team
UNEP	United Nations Environment Programme
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNHCR	Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
WASH	water, sanitation and hygiene
WFP	World Food Programme

Executive summary

Humanitarian organizations are increasingly faced with the need to reduce their environmental footprint. The present “triple planetary crisis”, namely climate change, pollution, and biodiversity loss, is eroding the foundations of sustainable development and wellbeing, with impacts more visible in the global south. In this guide, “environment” is used comprehensively to address all these interlinked dimensions of the triple planetary crisis. The humanitarian sector has a collective responsibility to take environmental and climate action, address the environmental dimensions of emergencies, reduce the environmental impacts of humanitarian operations, and respond to the growing humanitarian needs related to climate change. This is also based on the formal recognition of the human right to life and a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment. Humanitarian organizations must find ways of operating that are more environmentally responsible, and mainstream environmental considerations both into their programmes and projects and into their support operations and day-to-day activities.

In recent years, environmental responsibility and sustainability in humanitarian operations has gained significant momentum. This has resulted in increasing environmental commitments, a wider adoption of environmental policies, multiple initiatives to “green” humanitarian operations, and new approaches to improve local environmental conditions and community resilience as part of humanitarian response and recovery. A recent example of the growing commitment is the Climate and Environment Charter for Humanitarian Organizations, signed by almost 400 organizations and entities, coupled with guidance and tools for its implementation.

The current momentum is also noticeable among humanitarian donors which increasingly set environmental criteria, including a requirement to have an environmental policy in place. The humanitarian aid donors’ declaration on climate and environment has to date been signed by almost 30 donors and is accompanied by an annual review of progress. Similarly, humanitarian funds are also requesting partners to report on environmental safeguards more often. This increased focus on environment and climate is having a concrete effect, with more and more humanitarian organizations now developing environmental policies and putting measures in place to minimize their climate footprint. While the focus so far has been mostly on climate action, it goes without saying that also the other dimensions of the interlinked triple planetary crisis must be addressed, namely pollution and biodiversity loss. The increased focus on humanitarian-development-peace collaboration and the call for increased focus on resilience-building of communities, is also leading to a strengthened focus on environment and a change in programming. The “greening” of operations and programmes also is a priority in the United Nations system, requiring United Nations entities to measure, reduce and offset their environmental impacts, encompassing all elements of environmental action, including climate, pollution, and biodiversity loss.

Enhancing environmental responsibility and greening humanitarian operations is a relatively complex endeavour, since many humanitarian organizations operate in challenging contexts across multiple countries, utilizing global supply chains. Moreover, environmental impacts and the actions to reduce them are often very context-specific and can involve different trade-offs. This requires a thorough analysis of how the organization interacts with the environment, in order to determine which activities cause adverse environmental impacts or have the potential to do so. In addition, humanitarian organizations should identify opportunities to improve environmental conditions as part of their operations, for instance by restoring ecosystem functions that sustain lives and livelihoods during humanitarian response and recovery.

Senior managers play a crucial role in shifting their organizations towards a more environmentally responsible way of operating. The leadership and engagement of senior management are indispensable to a successful integration of environmental considerations across all levels and functions of the organization. It is the responsibility of senior management to direct this process, and to define appropriate environmental commitments, targets, and actions according to the organization’s operational context and activities. Senior managers should:

- Prioritize environmental responsibility in humanitarian operations
- Consider environmental objectives as part of overall management objectives
- Develop an environmental policy, environmental management system, and action plan
- Lead by example, motivate, and build a culture of accountability for environmental impacts
- Assign dedicated full-time roles and define responsibilities for environmental action
- Ensure sufficient resources and support for the environmental policy implementation process
- Communicate environmental commitments within the organization and externally
- Implement continuous improvement and facilitate learning

Senior managers, programme and project managers, and employees with environmental roles, in humanitarian organizations, can draw on the field of environmental management to reduce the organization's environmental impacts and achieve environmentally sustainable outcomes. Some organizations with a humanitarian mandate may already have developed such tools and approaches as part of their development work and/or quality management systems, and the approach to environmental management will need to be adopted to the organization's realities. That notwithstanding, some common and important tools, measures and standard practices include the following:

- **An environmental policy** defines the organization's strategic direction and environmental commitment. It provides a framework for the organization's environmental objectives, sets the level of environmental responsibility, and describes core values and guiding principles that substantiate an organization's commitment to reduce environmental harm and enhance environmental responsibility. In some organizations, the environmental policy can be part of a sustainability policy or other similar frameworks.
- **An environmental management system (EMS)** includes the nuts and bolts of reducing the organization's environmental footprint and offers a systematic approach to manage and reduce the negative and prioritize the positive environmental impacts related to the organization's operations and activities, developing environmental action plans, and monitoring the environmental performance over time. The Plan–Do–Act–Check cycle of the EMS helps to determine concrete measures to mitigate adverse environmental impacts and maximize environmental benefits. In cases when setting up an EMS is not feasible, the tools and approaches of an EMS can be applied instead.
- **Environmental assessments** exist in various forms and provide the evidence base necessary to understand the organization's interaction with the environment and improve environmental performance. In humanitarian programmes and projects, environmental assessments directly contribute to the protection of human lives and health, by identifying risks, as well as opportunities to improve vital ecosystem functions. When it comes to organizational impacts, a key element of the environmental assessment is the establishment of a baseline, e.g. for greenhouse gas emissions.
- **The integration of environmental management activities** into the organization's operational processes, activities and functions – such as end-to-end supply chain, fleet management, logistics, facilities management, information and communications technologies, and travel – systematically reduces environmental impacts related to water, energy and waste, and creates more environmentally responsible operations.
- **Environmental training** is the primary means of building competence in the organization, raising awareness about environmental concerns and developing capacities to operate in an environmentally responsible way.

- **Internal and external communication and coordination** – within humanitarian organizations, within the humanitarian sector, and with external stakeholders, such as academia and private sector – enables exchanges of knowledge and environmental information that are necessary in order to identify and address environmental concerns, whilst avoiding “recreating the wheel” and collaborating on synergistic activities and policies.
- **Continuous improvement** is the process through which each organization increases the suitability, adequacy and effectiveness of its EMS. Through this process of analysing, evaluating, adapting and improving the EMS, the organization can also improve its environmental performance and enhance its overall environmental responsibility.

Despite the actual and perceived challenges of reducing the environmental impacts of humanitarian operations, there are several benefits and opportunities associated with greater environmental responsibility. Humanitarian organizations can increase resource efficiency, improve operational risk management, better meet increased environmental requirements, deliver on sector- or organization-wide sustainability targets, and be more accountable to people in need. Therefore, a new way of working should be one that is also environmentally responsible and sustainable. Additionally, mainstreaming and change management are critical to change the approach humanitarian organizations are taking in their everyday activities to ensure a sustained positive environmental impact.

1

Introduction

1. Introduction

Human-induced global environmental change continues to reach unprecedented levels, as vast land-use changes, environmental pollution, excessive exploitation of natural resources, extensive use of fossil fuels and emissions of greenhouse gases significantly alter the biosphere. Today, the most urgent large-scale and interlinked “triple planetary crisis” refers to massive pollution, biodiversity loss¹, and climate change.² Humanity’s collective impact on the environment is so all-encompassing and occurs on such a scale that it has ushered in a new geological epoch: the Anthropocene.³ Substantial, rapid and partially irreversible environmental change seems to be an inescapable feature of this “human age”, which requires urgent collective action to reduce catastrophic loss and damage as much as is possible.

Following the general recognition of the criticality of nature for human life and sustainable development, it is only logical that environmental stewardship has gained increased attention also within the humanitarian sector. The state of the environment – both locally and globally – fundamentally shapes people’s needs, vulnerabilities and livelihoods. In humanitarian settings, high levels of income dependency on agriculture, fishing, and ecosystem services in general render a great number of people vulnerable to environmental degradation and climate change. Climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution pose a risk to current and future progress on food, water, energy, and livelihood security, thereby threatening to undermine the resilience of communities and ecosystems around the world. Additionally, the most disadvantaged communities are disproportionately affected by environmental degradation and climate change, directly resulting in worsened humanitarian impacts. As a result, crises become more protracted and recurrent.

The need for humanitarian assistance continues to grow as more extreme climatic conditions, sea-level rise, and weather-related hazards drive displacement and exacerbate chronic vulnerabilities. Climate change and environmental degradation – whether in the shape of contaminated water, air pollution or biodiversity loss – are drivers of human suffering, while also adding “an additional layer of stress to humanitarian organizations that are already stretched thinner than ever before” (OCHA, 2019). Even by conservative estimates, additional humanitarian needs due to climate change in 2030 could range from \$500 million to \$6 billion (IFRC, 2019). Recognizing this climate-related increase in humanitarian needs, the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) has established a climate change sub-working group focused on joint advocacy for climate action in the humanitarian system as well as a climate crisis roadmap for the IASC.

The humanitarian sector must adapt to the complex challenges posed by the triple planetary crisis while reducing its own environmental impacts. To limit global warming and reduce climate-related disaster risk, the sector must also take part in unprecedented climate action. Consequently, humanitarian organizations are faced with a responsibility to reduce the environmental footprint of their programmes, projects, support operations, and day-to-day activities across their facilities, while minimizing harm to ecosystems and their services and protecting and upholding the rights of affected populations. While the topic of environmental sustainability in the humanitarian sector has gained significant momentum in recent years, many humanitarian organizations need to take a more systematic approach to become more environmentally responsible and adequately address the environmental dimensions of emergencies. Similarly, efforts must move from pure climate action to a more holistic view of environment, encompassing also pollution and biodiversity loss. Doing so also presents an opportunity to improve the quality of humanitarian action beyond the short term, to reduce operational risks, to deliver on the promise to do no harm, and to transcend the humanitarian-development-peace gap by contributing to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

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1. The [Global Assessment Report on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services](#) (2019) provides an in-depth assessment of biodiversity trends and the status of ecosystem services.
 2. For up-to-date global climate data, see [NASA Global Climate Change](#).
 3. For a scientific discussion of evidence of an Anthropocene epoch, see [Waters and others \(2016\)](#).

1.1. Scope

The present guidance, commissioned by the IASC,⁴ describes why environmental responsibility is an important element of humanitarian action, and outlines how humanitarian organizations can take action to reduce their environmental footprint and improve environmental sustainability. In this guide, “environment” is used comprehensively to address all these interlinked dimensions of the triple planetary crisis.

The guidance summarizes relevant environmental management approaches and practices that help to address the organization’s environmental impacts and lay the foundation for more environmentally responsible humanitarian operations. Key elements of existing environmental management guidance, such as ISO 14001 on environmental management systems, have been adapted to reflect the particularities of humanitarian organizations and their operations. While ISO 14001 remains an important guiding document for environmental management, it should be noted that its application in full may not be feasible for many organizations operating in the humanitarian space. Such organizations can still draw on the approaches and processes explained in this guidance for improving their environmental management. Similarly, some organizations may already have developed environmental management approaches and practices as part of their development activities and/or quality management systems. In these cases, humanitarian activities and processes can draw on this experience to improve environmental sustainability.

The guidance places specific emphasis on senior management and its vital role in an organization’s environmental responsibility. It provides an overview of different measures to mainstream environmental considerations across all levels and functions of the organization. In addition, this document includes practical information and resources for project planners looking to maximize the environmental sustainability of humanitarian programmes and projects. The different sections of the guidance can largely be read independently of one another, based on the needs of the reader.

Due to the unique context in which humanitarian action takes place, the guidance at times differentiates between the organizational level (i.e., the facilities and day-to-day support operations) and the programme and project level. This distinction is made to reflect the partially different set of actions related to environmental sustainability at the level of programmes and projects, such as environmental assessments and screenings during humanitarian response. Please bear in mind that a distinction between these levels is somewhat arbitrary, as humanitarian programmes and projects do not occur in a vacuum. They are interlinked with and depend on the organization’s day-to-day support operations and activities. For instance, the reduction of plastic and other packaging waste in humanitarian emergencies requires programme and project managers to set sustainable product criteria for sustainable procurement professionals to tender for smart packaging – decisions that should be made before, during, and after the emergency context.

As noted in the strategy for sustainability management in the United Nations system, it ultimately makes little difference whether an impact is deemed to have a programmatic or operational cause: it belongs to the duty of care of the United Nations to ensure that all reasonable precautions are taken to prevent United Nations activities from harming local communities and the natural systems that underpin their livelihoods (CEB, 2019, p. 9). This holistic perspective should equally apply to non-United Nations organizations.

4. At the meeting of the Executive Committee on 29 May 2020, the Secretary-General requested OCHA to organize, with the participation of UNEP, a working group under IASC to offer guidance and lessons learned for improving environmental responsibility in United Nations emergency and humanitarian operations.

Explanatory box: Overlaps and differences between environmental responsibility, climate change adaptation and resilience-building

For the purposes of the present guidance, it is important to differentiate environmental responsibility in humanitarian operations (or “greening” humanitarian action) from climate change adaptation and resilience-building at the local level.

The first approach involves reducing the negative environmental impacts of humanitarian operations, including the environmental impacts that occur at facilities, as part of support operations, or due to humanitarian programmes and projects. It also includes environmental actions that improve local environmental conditions as part of humanitarian response and recovery.

The second approach, on the other hand, focuses on the capacities of local communities and ecosystems. It supports communities in mitigating and adapting to, as well as managing different risks and impacts, such as natural hazards, by developing their capacities to prevent, anticipate, prepare for, respond to, or absorb, and recover and adapt from different shocks and stressors (United Nations 2020). This builds resilience of local social-ecological systems to climate risks and other hazards, enabling transformations towards safe and sustainable development pathways.

Both approaches have considerable overlaps and make an important contribution to reducing human suffering and improving well-being beyond the short term. Furthermore, climate change adaptation and resilience-building interventions still need to be carried out in an environmentally responsible way to be sustainable, efficient and effective, where the application of Nature-based Solutions plays a key role. Similarly, environmentally responsible humanitarian action has benefits for the resilience of local communities and ecosystems, for example by avoiding contamination or by better preserving local ecosystem functions and natural resources on which human lives and livelihoods depend.

However, enhancing the environmental responsibility of humanitarian organizations does not automatically build the resilience of local communities to climate change, biodiversity loss, pollution and other stresses, which requires a partially different set of measures, for example early warning systems, risk proofing infrastructures, insurance, social protection, Nature-based Solutions and other disaster risk reduction measures. While recognizing the interconnectedness of both approaches, the present guidance focuses on the measures related to environmental responsibility and not on risk and vulnerability reduction that pertain to resilience building processes across and within systems.

Similarly, it should be noted that the international financing available for environmental responsibility and the financing available for resilience-building, is often derived from different funding streams. Financing for operational greening activities, such as replacement of plastic packaging of humanitarian goods or the replacement of generators with renewable energy sources, can be provided through cost savings from efficiencies, donor investment, partnerships with the public sector, or by other means. Resilience-building activities, on the other hand, would often be financed through national investment, international official development assistance and/or humanitarian funding. At the same time, resilience building cannot take place without putting ecosystems and natural resources at the core of multi-risk and impact management processes.

1.2. Structure

The present guidance is structured into three chapters, each focusing on different aspects of environmental responsibility in humanitarian organizations and their operations. The first chapter introduces the topic of environmental responsibility and sustainability in the humanitarian context. Section 1.3, which follows, summarizes key arguments why environmental responsibility is important for humanitarian organizations and how a systematic consideration of the environment contributes to humanitarian objectives and enhances the quality of humanitarian response and recovery. These arguments will be very familiar to readers with experience in the environment and humanitarian action (EHA) field of practice.

The second chapter covers how humanitarian organizations can increase their environmental commitment. It addresses the crucial leadership role of senior management in facilitating action to improve environmental performance and create an organization-wide culture of environmental responsibility. The chapter provides guidance on environmental policies and commitment statements as key instruments for humanitarian organizations to reduce their environmental footprint and improve the environmental sustainability of their operations.

The third chapter provides an overview of measures to enhance the management of the environmental impacts caused by support operations and day-to-day activities as well as by humanitarian programmes and projects. The chapter introduces key elements of environmental management, such as environmental management systems and environmental assessments, as well as other practical measures to improve environmental performance across all levels and functions of the organization.

Throughout the guidance, additional information is provided in the form of further reading lists, links, tools, and other resources. Several example boxes help to illustrate content and showcase different aspects of environmental management in practice. Definitions of key terminology can be found in the glossary, and the supplementary information is included in the annex, such as an overview of current initiatives and developments.

1.3. A need for environmental responsibility

Since humanitarian organizations operate in unique emergency contexts and life-saving situations, the actual and perceived trade-offs between the humanitarian imperative to assist people in need and the associated environmental footprint are certainly plausible. Humanitarian action should observe a do-no-harm approach while being implemented at the lowest carbon footprint possible and avoiding pollution and other adverse environmental impacts such as biodiversity loss. The people receiving assistance are often the most disadvantaged and the ones to least have contributed to climate change and pollution. This recognition has contributed to an increasing environmental consciousness within the humanitarian sector and a growing sector-wide environmental commitment. In recent years, the previous dichotomy between the humanitarian imperative and environmental action has become significantly less prominent and the environment is not typically considered a “development issue” by humanitarians anymore.

Concerns relating to environmental impacts and sustainability have gained more attention, with a strong increase in environmental guidance, standards, policies, and training for humanitarian actors. For instance, [The Sphere Handbook 2018](#) gives greater consideration to the environment than previous versions, and in 2019, the first-ever Sphere [thematic sheet](#) on the environment was published. In April 2022, the [Sphere Nature-based Solutions for Climate Resilience in Humanitarian Action Unpacked Guide](#) was launched. It targets humanitarian

practitioners and provides advice on how to apply nature-based solutions (NbS) for resilience in humanitarian contexts, including for disaster risk reduction and climate change adaptation.

In line with the [humanitarian aid donors' declaration on climate and environment as well as the Climate and Environment Charter, donors](#) “are increasingly requesting humanitarian implementing partners to demonstrate that their projects consider environmental degradation and climate change” (USAID, 2023: 5). The [Multi-Donor Policy Landscape Analysis: Environmental Sustainability and Climate Change Mitigation](#) provides an overview of how donors are integrating and mainstreaming environmental sustainability and climate change mitigation into their priorities, partnerships, and funding of humanitarian organizations.

The following points summarize key arguments why considering humanitarian-environment linkages is critical for successful efforts to support disaster-affected people:

- **“Do no harm” requires environmentally responsible humanitarian action.**
Humanitarian assistance must not inflict further harm upon its recipients. A degraded environment can put disaster-affected people at risk and exacerbate their vulnerability, potentially triggering or worsening a humanitarian crisis. Environmentally responsible humanitarian action protects people by reducing harmful environmental impacts and improving the environment as part of the response (see annex A for examples of sector-specific adverse environmental impacts and associated measures for preventing or mitigating these).
- **Lives and livelihoods depend on the environment.**
A healthy environment is fundamental to human dignity and well-being. Many communities directly depend on the material goods and non-material services provided by local ecosystems. Environmentally responsible humanitarian action safeguards the natural capital that sustains local communities' basic necessities of life.
- **Environmental impacts have a gendered dimension.**
Local environmental impacts, such as deforestation, can have gender dimensions. For instance, the collection of scarce natural resources can expose women and girls to gender-based violence, leading to increased protection needs. Environmentally sustainable approaches, such as using safe and clean energy alternatives, can improve safety and opportunities for women and girls while improving local environmental conditions.
- **Environmental considerations have protection implications and human rights dimensions.**
All people everywhere have the right to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment⁵. Disasters and crisis often result in environmental degradation, which can directly impact people's access to clean water, sanitation, food, and clean air, and directly can impact protection risks. For instance, environment-impacting practices can exacerbate protection risks (e.g., illicit trade in wildlife, mining, trafficking of natural resources or illicit drugs can be interconnected with trafficking in persons, child labour, competition for natural resources). Making protection central to the response requires understanding, prevention, and mitigation of actual or potential protection risks as well as evidence-based programming, advocacy and participation of communities.
- **Adhering to humanitarian standards.**
The Core Humanitarian Standard on Quality and Accountability (CHS) explicitly recognizes the role of environmental responsibility. For instance, CHS commitment 3 states that potential or actual unintended negative effects on the environment have to be identified and acted upon in a timely and systematic manner. Additionally, CHS commitment 9 requires an environmentally responsible use of local and natural resources, which actively considers environmental impacts. The Core Humanitarian Standard is currently undergoing revision to better account for changes in the global policy context, including the realities of the climate emergency.

5. The human right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment: resolution adopted by the Human Rights Council on 8 October 2021, [A/HRC/RES/48/13](#)

- **Enhancing accountability and effectiveness of humanitarian action.**

A systematic integration of environmental considerations is also a matter of accountability to affected people since they predominantly bear the consequences of environmental damage. Through greater environmental sustainability, humanitarian operations can also become more efficient and effective in the longer term, for instance by improving resource efficiency and risk management, reducing environmental drivers of conflict and displacement, and enabling a sustainable recovery.

- **Transcending the humanitarian-development divide.**

The environmental dimensions of emergencies often persist beyond the time frame of the humanitarian response. Many environmental concerns are cross-sectoral, pertaining both to humanitarian work and to development work. As such, environmental sustainability itself can be a bridge between the humanitarian sector and the development sector.

- **Reducing risks and contributing to social-ecological resilience.**

When the environment is systematically taken into consideration, humanitarian operations can prevent or reduce environmental degradation and its associated risks, such as natural hazards and loss of ecosystem functions. Healthy ecosystems are the foundation for resilient communities, and ecosystem resilience benefits from environmental stewardship. The resilience of both social and ecological systems is interlinked and plays a central role in the adaptation to climate change.

Explanatory box: Defining environmental responsibility and environmental sustainability

Depending on the context and the sector, both concepts can be defined differently. For the purposes of the present guidance and in the humanitarian context, these terms can be understood in the following ways:

- **Environmental responsibility** refers to an organization's duty to operate in a way that avoids and mitigates adverse environmental impacts. This includes the organization's commitment to reduce its overall environmental footprint as best as possible, while being accountable for any environmental harm it has incurred.
- **Environmental sustainability** refers to the capacity to meet the needs of both current generations and future generations without compromising the ecosystem components and functions that fundamentally sustain these needs. This means meeting humanitarian needs in a way that maintains or improves the capacity and function of ecosystems.

Simply put, environmental responsibility describes the commitment to operate in accordance with certain environmental standards, while environmental sustainability is the overarching goal and the long-term preservation of ecosystem functions for future generations.

While environmental policies and environmental management practices are still more common among development and public- and private-sector organizations, many humanitarian organizations are increasingly taking action to enhance their environmental responsibility. Additionally, initiatives such as [Greening the Blue](#), the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) [Green Response](#) and the [Climate Action Accelerator](#) have made a significant impact and have illustrated that environmental responsibility in humanitarian operations goes beyond the emergency response and recovery context: it also includes how humanitarian organizations reduce their environmental footprint overall, meaning how the environmental impacts of support operations, including logistics, and of the day-to-day activities across different facilities are managed.

There are several benefits and opportunities for humanitarian organizations that take action to reduce their environmental footprint and invest in measures to improve the environmental sustainability of their operations, such as:

- Compliance with national environmental laws and regulations
- Meeting increased environmental requirements from humanitarian donors
- Improving operational risk management by reducing harmful environmental impacts
- Greater accountability to staff, affected people and communities
- Contributing to protecting future generations from the impacts of climate change
- Finding innovative solutions to “do good” and lead by example
- Contributing to the Sustainable Development Goals and to multilateral agreements such as the Paris Agreement, the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction and the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework
- Delivering on sector-wide or organization-wide environmental sustainability targets
- Potential cost savings in the long run due to better resource efficiency, including lower costs for materials, energy, logistics and services (while acknowledging that environmental action may require additional costs, especially in the beginning)

Despite these benefits and opportunities, many humanitarian organizations face with practical challenges when trying to reduce their environmental footprint. The lack of a uniform system or standard for humanitarian organizations to measure, reduce and offset the environmental and climate impacts of their operations creates “a messy picture of greening efforts in the sector” (Salzenstein and Pedersen, 2021) and managing finite resources across competing needs remains a challenge.

Nonetheless, as explored in the present guidance, there are also multiple positive examples of humanitarian organizations taking action to reduce environmental impacts and strengthen environmental sustainability. As regards the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, the [Red Goes Green report](#) (Hartelius, 2020) provides a valuable insight into the barriers and enablers for mainstreaming environmental considerations across an organization.

Resource box: Good practices, and initiatives

There is a growing number of resources dedicated to the field of environment and humanitarian action, which highlight good practices, initiatives, and lessons learned. To learn more about this field of practice, start with the following resources:

- [Sphere thematic sheet: Reducing environmental impact in humanitarian response](#) (2019)
- [A Sphere Unpacked Guide: Nature-based Solutions for Climate Resilience in Humanitarian Action](#) (2023)
- [Guidance on the operationalisation of the minimum environmental requirements and recommendations for EU-funded humanitarian aid operations](#) (2022)
- [Joint Initiative On Sustainable Humanitarian Assistance Packaging Waste Management](#) (2023)
- [The Environmental Sustainability in Humanitarian Logistics project \(Global Logistics Cluster / WREC\)](#) (2023)
- [Sustainable Supply Chain Alliance \(SSCA\) Project](#) (2023)
- [Environment and humanitarian action: Increasing effectiveness, sustainability and accountability](#) (2014)
- [Environmental footprint of humanitarian assistance funded by DG ECHO: scoping review](#) (2020)
- [Going green: Strengthening the climate and environmental sustainability of response and recovery operations](#) (2020)
- [Compendium of Good Practices for a Greener Humanitarian Response](#) (2021)
- [Protecting Lives, Livelihoods and the Environment in Humanitarian Operations](#) (2021)
- [Environmental Mainstreaming in Humanitarian Interventions](#) (2020)
- [Mainstreaming Environment and Climate Change into Humanitarian Action](#) (2015)
- [Guidance, standards and protocols in the humanitarian sector on reducing harm to the environment](#) (2019)

Further tools and resources can also be found on the [EHA Connect](#) online platform. In addition, annex B lists several initiatives and processes that address different environmental aspects of humanitarian operations.

2

Commitment and leadership

2. Commitment and leadership

The current momentum towards greater environmental responsibility and sustainability can be seen as part of a wider shift in the humanitarian sector to work in a new way. Efforts leading up to and following the World Humanitarian Summit of 2016 and the Agenda for Humanity have catalysed new commitments as well as system-wide change to the ways in which humanitarian assistance is delivered. Some key shifts, from an environmental perspective, include a greater prioritization of climate-related risks, the localization of humanitarian aid, a greater focus on local capacities and community resilience, and commitments to transcend the humanitarian-development-peace divide and to work jointly over multi-year time frames, including with multi-year planning and funding. In accordance with these developments, an IASC sub-group on climate change was recently created and is tasked with developing a roadmap for the IASC community on the climate crisis. At the same time, other dimensions of the triple planetary crisis, such as biodiversity, are still receiving less attention.

These high-level commitments are indicative of a changing humanitarian system, which includes greater consideration of the role of the environment in humanitarian needs, risks, and vulnerabilities. The shift towards more environmentally responsible humanitarian action also requires the commitment of each humanitarian organization to reduce its own environmental footprint across all its organizational levels, functions, and processes.

Thus far, environmental commitments and policies have been more common among organizations in the public, private, and development sectors. Although the humanitarian sector used to lag behind in comparison, more humanitarian organizations are adopting environmental policies, environmentally friendly practices, and initiatives to “green” humanitarian operations.

The environmental commitment of each organization depends heavily on the leadership of senior management and its prioritization of environmental sustainability. The support of senior management is essential to successfully mainstream environmental considerations into humanitarian programmes and projects, as well as into the support operations across the entire organization. Senior managers also set intended environmental outcomes, which shapes the degree of environmental responsibility at different levels and functions of the organization.

Example box: A strategic approach towards environmental sustainability in the United Nations system

In 2007, the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination (CEB) approved the Climate Neutral Policy and Strategy. This strategy required the United Nations system to measure and reduce its environmental impacts, and to become climate-neutral by offsetting any unavoidable emissions by 2020.

In 2019, the Secretary-General of the United Nations, António Guterres, asked for these commitments to be updated and enhanced. As a result, the CEB endorsed the [Strategy for Sustainability Management in the United Nations System 2020-2030 – Part 1: Environmental Sustainability in the Area of Management](#).

This strategy:

- Offers a unified vision for the United Nations to lead on sustainability that is aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals
- Commits the United Nations system to align with the recommendation in the report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change to limit global warming to 1.5°C
- Promotes transparency and increased efforts to understand and track the collective environmental footprint of the United Nations

- Identifies five key environmental areas of risk and six key management functions to be mobilized
- Requires the United Nations system to look beyond facilities and operations and to define similarly ambitious objectives and targets for policies and programmes

The strategy includes a vision for sustainability in the UN system: “The UN System is a leader in integrating environmental and social sustainability considerations across its work in a systematic and coherent way, practicing the principles that it promotes and leaving a positive legacy.”

Phase 1 of the strategy is focused on internal environmental sustainability. It covers five environmental impact areas: greenhouse gas emissions, waste, water, air pollution, and biodiversity, across six management functions, namely procurement, human resources, facilities management, travel, events, and information and communications technology (ICT).

In 2021 the CEB endorsed the [Strategy for sustainability management in the United Nations system, 2020-2030 - Phase II: Towards leadership in environmental and social sustainability](#). Sustainability Strategy II builds on the first phase of the strategy but is more comprehensive in that it encompasses a fuller picture of environmental and social sustainability in UN system policies, programming, and support functions. It applies to all UN functions, including: governance functions such as policy development, leadership and performance management, programme functions including planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of projects, management functions such as human resources, financial management and events management and coordination functions such as reporting. Phase II of the Strategy is focused not only on the environmental but also on the social dimensions of sustainability management. Strategy II contains a set of entity-level outputs as well as a draft scorecard to measure progress towards outputs. The scorecard is currently (May 2023) being finalized and piloted in select UN entities.

The series of Greening the Blue reports continuously tracks and publishes the collective efforts of the United Nations to improve its environmental performance, which allows readers to see how emissions from United Nations system facilities and operations, including travel, have changed over time.

Learn more here:

Information and further resources are available on the [Greening the Blue website](#), and include:

- [History of greening the United Nations](#)
- [Methodology and approach](#)
- [Environmental performance of United Nations entities](#)

2.1. Role of senior management

Senior managers play a vital and multifaceted role in an organization's environmental responsibility. Their ability to recognize the benefits of environmental sustainability in humanitarian operations is an enabling factor for environmental mainstreaming in the entire organization. Senior management's commitment is a key requirement for strengthening the organization's environmental responsibility and improving the environmental performance of its operations. To enhance the environmental responsibility of their organization, senior managers should:

- **Prioritize environmental responsibility in humanitarian operations.**
Senior management's strategic prioritization of environmental sustainability in the organization and its operations is necessary to create organization-wide commitment and transition to an organizational culture of environmental responsibility. Such prioritization is also a key element in the consideration of environmental concerns from the outset of humanitarian emergencies. Senior management's engagement is decisive, as it provides a clear direction for the entire organization and is linked to target-setting and allocation of funding.
- **Consider environmental objectives as part of overall management objectives.**
To enhance environmental responsibility and achieve intended environmental outcomes, senior managers should systematically integrate environmental sustainability into the organization's work and strategic decision-making. During strategic planning, senior management's expertise and knowledge of the organization is required to align environmental objectives with the organization's mission, vision and values.
- **Develop an environmental policy, an environmental management system and an action plan.**
Senior management is responsible for formally committing the organization to environmental responsibility, developing an environmental policy, and establishing an EMS. Given their high-level perspective, senior managers are well equipped to link the environmental policy with other policy documents of the organization and to maintain an overall consistency. In some organizations, the environmental policy can be part of a sustainability policy or other similar frameworks.
- **Lead by example, motivate, and build a culture of accountability.**
Senior managers themselves must "walk the talk" and lead by example when it comes to the organization's environmental objectives. The leadership of senior managers sets the tone for the organization, and their commitment drives the organization towards greater environmental responsibility. Senior management should build a culture of accountability that encourages employees to be conscious of environmental impacts and to maximize environmental sustainability whenever possible.
- **Assign dedicated full-time roles and define responsibilities for environmental action.**
Successfully implementing and maintaining the environmental policy and EMS depends on designated roles, competent employees to fill these roles, and internal ownership across different levels of the organization. Senior management should delegate authority to employees in relevant roles who have responsibilities for environmental management activities. Senior managers need to review these roles and responsibilities regularly in order to ensure that sufficient capacities and expertise are available to fulfil these environmental functions.

- **Ensure sufficient resources and support the implementation process.**
The implementation of an environmental policy, an EMS and an action plan will inevitably incur costs. It is crucial that initial investments are budgeted for, and necessary expertise is made available. It is senior management's responsibility to dedicate sufficient resources, including both personnel and financial support, to enable people in the organization to take environmental action. The ability of senior managers to direct and coordinate the implementation process, as well as to muster internal environmental commitment, will further improve environmental mainstreaming. Additionally, it will be important to "break down the silos" between programmes and operations at the implementation level, as only this way will programmatic choices be made that can influence environmental emissions caused by operations.
- **Communicate environmental commitments within the organization and externally.**
Senior management should promote environmentally sustainable practices and communicate the need for environmental management within the organization to encourage the active participation of employees at all levels. Additionally, senior managers can communicate environmental objectives to external interested parties to signal the commitment of their organization and contribute to greater awareness for humanitarian-environment links.
- **Implement continuous improvement and facilitate learning.**
The responsibility for the organization's environmental performance ultimately rests with senior management. Senior managers are therefore advised to review the EMS, keep track of environmental targets, monitor progress, make necessary adjustments, and regularly identify new opportunities to improve environmental sustainability. Senior managers of different humanitarian organizations should also share key lessons learned to facilitate sector-wide learning.

Example box: Senior leadership commitments in the United Nations system

Part of the [United Nations system leadership framework](#), the Senior Leadership Commitments, of 2021, consist of five commitments and three cross-cutting principles to provide a structure for leaders and encourage proactive and inclusive leadership. The third cross-cutting principle is about "being ecologically conscious of how we work and act and ensuring the lightest possible environmental footprint in everything we do".

Central to this principle is the concept that "championing an eco-conscious mindset is a fundamental principle that needs to be given far greater prominence in every entity" in order to reduce the environmental footprint of organizations and their operations. To that end, environmentally sustainable measures should be incorporated into all facets of an organization's operations, and senior leaders should enable personnel to make green choices at their workplace and home offices (CEB, 2021, pp. 10–11).

Learn more here:

[Senior Leadership Commitments for the Future of Work in the United Nations System](#)

2.2. Environmental policy

Organizations usually formalize their environmental commitment by means of an environmental policy. The policy includes a pledge to improve environmental performance and defines the organization's strategic direction towards intended environmental outcomes. It clearly describes environmental objectives and establishes the level of environmental responsibility. As such, the environmental policy provides an instrumental framework that sets the course towards environmental sustainability across the organization. It typically also defines the core values and guiding principles that substantiate an organization's commitment to reducing environmental harm and enhancing environmental responsibility.

Though it is not yet standard practice in the humanitarian sector, the number of humanitarian organizations with an environmental policy has grown.⁶ Humanitarian organizations have to develop and implement their environmental policies and procedures in a way that does not compromise the overriding humanitarian imperative. At the same time, this override is only limited to situations in which a normal mode of operating is not possible, which makes an environmental policy still very relevant and beneficial for many aspects of humanitarian operations.

Additionally, humanitarian donors increasingly set certain environmental criteria, although to differing degrees and mostly focusing on "environmental sustainability and climate change mitigation at the individual project level" (USAID, 2023: 6). However, some donors require their implementing partners to have environmental commitments, action plans, and strategies in place. For instance, Sida and Global Affairs Canada require that partner organizations "develop an organization-wide environmental policy and set up an internal environmental management system" (Brangeon and Crowley, 2020, p. 9). Similarly, DG ECHO allocates more weight to partners with environmental policies. From 2024 onwards, DG ECHO will set environmental policies and an environmental management system as a requirement for existing partners (European Commission, 2020).

It is the responsibility of senior management to develop an environmental policy and to align the organization's environmental objectives, commitments, and obligations in accordance with the environmental impacts that result from its activities, products, and services (ISO 14004:2016). For humanitarian organizations, this means linking environmental commitments to both the humanitarian objectives and their sector-specific goals. For instance, [Medair's environmental policy](#) states that the "commitment to environmental stewardship and sustainability will optimize Medair's ability to fulfil its mission to relieve human suffering in some of the world's most remote and devastated places" (Medair, 2020, p. 1).

Example box: The environmental policy of the World Food Programme (WFP)

The [environmental policy](#) of WFP, of 2017, commits the organization to systematically identify, avoid, and manage risks to the environment from its work, covering both programmatic activities and support operations. It consists of three main implementation tools, which together with the organization's overarching principles, form the WFP Environmental and Social Sustainability Framework:

1. **Environmental and social standards:** A set of minimum requirements that need to be respected in all activities, distilled from international agreements and WFP policies and guidance documents
2. **Environmental and social safeguards for programme activities:** A set of tools to identify and manage environmental and social risks in the programme cycle

6. A listing of different examples of environmental and climate policies can be found within the [bibliography](#).

3. Environmental management system manual: A system based on ISO 14001 to guide day-to-day decision-making on the environmental sustainability of support operations, including of facilities, administration, supply chains, information technology, and travel

The sustainability framework is aligned with the WFP risk management framework, and the standards and safeguards are in line with the [Model Approach to Environmental and Social Standards in United Nations Programming](#) and with best practices in other United Nations agencies and at the World Bank.

There is no one-size-fits-all approach for an environmental policy. Each organization should develop its environmental policy according to its operational context and its intended environmental outcomes. In the case of United Nations agencies, the environmental policies adhere to the United Nations system-wide commitments to environmental sustainability and are aligned with the [strategy for sustainability management in the United Nations system](#). Additionally, the [Model Approach to Environmental and Social Standards in United Nations Programming](#) provides United Nations entities with a common approach for developing and aligning environmental and social standards for programming. For many non-United Nations humanitarian organizations, such an overarching environmental sustainability and standards framework might not exist. Environmental policies can therefore differ considerably in scope and complexity, but each organization should generally consider:

- Its vision, mission, and core values and beliefs
- The context in which it operates
- Guiding principles to inform the implementation
- Internal and external issues relevant to environmental responsibility, including specific local and/or regional contexts (e.g. the local, regional and global environmental impacts of different activities)
- Actual and potential effects on the organization's activities from external environmental conditions and events (e.g. changing humanitarian needs due to climate change)
- Needs and expectations of, and communication with, interested parties
- Coordination with the organization's other policies (e.g. its code of ethics, protection policy, gender policy etc.)
- Alignment with international treaties and global agreements (e.g. the Paris Agreement, the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction, United Nations conventions etc.)

Despite differences in overall scope and level of detail, the environmental policy should set the organization on a path towards environmental sustainability and should enable it to contribute to global environmental action, including protection and restoration of biodiversity and ecosystems, prevention of pollution, improvements in resource efficiency, and reduction of greenhouse gases.

See the bibliography for several different examples of how various organizations have set up their environmental and climate policies. Furthermore, the table in annex C provides an overview of various exemplary environmental commitments that are worth considering for humanitarian organizations.

2.3. Environmental commitment statement

As part of their environmental policy, organizations usually make an environmental commitment statement and set out a plan of action to enhance environmental responsibility. While it is strongly advised to adopt an environmental policy, not all humanitarian organizations necessarily choose to do so and some may include environmental elements into other policies. Nevertheless, even without an environmental policy, a simple environmental commitment statement can still be used to define the organization's environmental objectives. Humanitarian organizations that are committed to increasing the environmental sustainability of their operations should share their environmental commitment statement publicly to communicate intended environmental outcomes to external interested parties.

The commitment statement should capture the essence of the organization's values and activities, while stating its environmental commitments and objectives in a concise manner. As such, each commitment statement is unique, but senior managers should consider these aspects:

- **Reasoning** – Why is environmental sustainability important to us?
- **Goal** – What do we want to achieve? What are our goals and targets?
- **Success criteria** – How do we envision success? What should our organization look like?

Example box: Statement of commitment by the Humanitarian Environment Network

In 2020, thirteen member organizations of the Humanitarian Environment Network signed a joined statement of commitment, in which they committed to:

- Measure the environmental and carbon impacts of their actions regularly
- Halve emissions by 2030 and cut emissions by 30 per cent by 2025
- Integrate analysis of climate-related and environmental risks into all actions, and promote the implementation of prevention, mitigation and adaptation actions where relevant
- Reduce negative impacts, and promote humanitarian and development actions that have a positive impact, on the environment and the climate
- Develop and call upon local expertise, in line with the Grand Bargain commitments on localization
- Make relevant information public as soon as available and on an annual basis
- Raise awareness among as many collaborators as possible about the major impacts of the climate and environmental crises on the most vulnerable

The member organizations include:

Action contre la Faim, Agence d'Aide à la Coopération Technique et au Développement, Alliance for International Medical Action, CARE France, Électriciens Sans Frontières, Gret, Groupe URD, Handicap International, Médecins du Monde, Première Urgence Internationale, Secours Islamique France, Solidarités International, and Terre des Hommes.

Learn more here:

[Groupe URD, Statement of commitment on climate by humanitarian organizations](#)

2.4. Climate and Environment Charter for Humanitarian Organizations

Apart from their own environmental policy, commitment statement and/or action plan, humanitarian organizations have the opportunity to commit themselves to greater environmental responsibility by adopting the [Climate and Environment Charter for Humanitarian Organizations](#). The Charter is a type of statement of commitment that recognizes that humanitarian organizations have a key role to play in addressing both the climate crisis and the environmental crisis. It promotes collective action to enhance environmental sustainability within the humanitarian sector and to help people adapt to environmental and climate change. To date (May 2023) there are 360 signatories to the charter, including civil society and UN agencies, as well as 11 supporters, which include Member States and regional organizations.

The Charter includes seven high-level commitments that humanitarian organizations can adhere to:

1. Step up their response to growing humanitarian needs and help people adapt to the impacts of the climate and environmental crises
2. Maximize the environmental sustainability of their work and rapidly reduce their greenhouse gas emissions
3. Embrace the leadership of local actors and communities
4. Increase their capacity to understand climate and environmental risks and to develop evidence-based solutions
5. Work collaboratively across the humanitarian sector and beyond to strengthen climate and environmental action
6. Use their influence to mobilize urgent and more ambitious climate action and environmental protection
7. Develop time-bound targets and action plans, and measure their progress on implementing the commitments

The Charter provides example targets for each commitment, but humanitarian organizations that adopt the Charter should set their own specific and appropriate targets that demonstrate how environmental responsibility will be enhanced. By adopting the Charter, humanitarian organizations commit to finalizing their environmental targets within a year of signing it. Donor agencies can also endorse the Charter, as supporters. Further information about the Charter is available [here](#).

Resource box: Guidance on the Climate and Environment Charter for Humanitarian Organizations

Further guidance exists for each of the Charter's commitments to help organizations develop specific and measurable targets as a basis for their action plans. Links to additional tools and resources are also included, for each commitment.

[Learn more about each of the Charter's commitments](#)

3

Enhancing environmental responsibility

3. Enhancing environmental responsibility

Though the recent shifts across the humanitarian systems and the commitments to work in a new way are instrumental in creating more environmentally responsible humanitarian action, each organization also needs to carefully consider and address the environmental impacts of its day-to-day activities and support operations. However, systematically integrating environmental considerations at the programme or project level can be significantly different from internal day-to-day environmental management business at the organizational level.

The “greening” of humanitarian programmes and projects presents unique set of challenges, which typically requires a mix of localized (e.g., improved water management) and global (e.g., limiting single-use plastics) solutions. Environmental responsibility can be more complex in disaster and conflict settings and is often further complicated by working in remote and environmentally sensitive locations, limited availability of local resources, restricted access, political instability, and more. In contrast, humanitarian organizations can draw on a multitude of existing guidance and standards (e.g. the [ISO 14000 series](#) on environmental management) to improve their internal environmental management, as it is similar to that of non-humanitarian organizations operating internationally with global logistics and supply chains.

Though similar environmental considerations are relevant at the organizational and the programme/project level (e.g., emissions, impacts on biodiversity, waste, water, and energy), integrating these levels and functions of a humanitarian organization under a coherent strategy for environmental sustainability can be a complex task. Consequently, many humanitarian organizations have either prioritized their internal environmental management or have focused on “greening” their programmes and projects in the field. To enhance environmental responsibility across the whole organization, however, all different levels and functions need to be addressed.

The remainder of the present guidance outlines relevant tools and approaches for humanitarian organizations that seek to enhance their environmental responsibility and improve environmental mainstreaming across programmes and projects. Key elements of environmental management guidance have been adapted to reflect the particularities of humanitarian organizations and their operations. Numerous links to relevant resources are provided throughout the chapter and in annex B. Please also consult [EHA Connect](#) for environmental guidance that is cluster-specific and aligned with the humanitarian programme cycle.

Example box: Environmental sustainability at the International Organization for Migration (IOM)

In 2017, IOM made an institutional commitment to mainstream environmental sustainability in its strategies, projects and programmes, as well as its facility management and operations. To achieve environmental objectives and strengthen internal governance related to environmental sustainability, IOM focuses on establishing the foundations for an IOM-specific environmental governance and management system in line with the UN system-wide commitments. IOM also prioritizes management and operational innovation, including the use of innovative finance, and sharing of good practices among IOM missions to reduce the organization’s global environmental footprint and enable the sustainability transition at scale.

Learn more here:

[Greening the Blue – IOM](#)

3.1. Environmental management system

An EMS is a key tool to improve an organization's environmental performance. Each organization must define the scope of the EMS based on its needs, available resources, operational context, and intended environmental outcomes. An EMS includes the nuts and bolts of reducing the organization's environmental footprint and offers a systematic approach to prioritize environmental impacts related to the organization's operations and activities. With the help of an EMS, concrete measures to mitigate negative environmental impacts, maximize environmental benefits and enhance the organization's environmental responsibility are specified.

An EMS typically follows a "Plan–Do–Check–Act" cycle, which is an iterative four-stage process, characterized by its adaptiveness and by continuous improvement:

- *Plan:*

During this stage, each organization identifies the key environmental aspects and impacts of its programmes, operations and activities and defines its environmental objectives. This is critical for an understanding of the organization's environmental footprint and to prioritize improvement measures. Furthermore, roles and responsibilities are assigned in order to address identified environmental impacts and ensure progress on the environmental objectives. An action plan can help to detail concrete measures for immediate implementation, as well as medium- to long-term actions that are required to address more complex environmental sustainability challenges.

- *Do:*

To implement planned actions and maintain the EMS, the required resources and competencies need to be determined first. It is very important to build capacity among staff on environmental awareness. Then, previously planned measures can be systematically integrated into different processes and activities of the organization so that negative effects on the environment will be reduced and continuously managed. Additionally, internal and external communication (see sect. 3.5) as well as information management processes need to be established and maintained.

- *Check:*

This includes monitoring, measuring, and evaluating the effectiveness of environmental management measures to track progress on the intended environmental outcomes and commitments specified in the environmental policy and action plan. Management review and internal control are key elements in this stage.

- *Act:*

During the final stage of the cycle, corrective actions are taken to address the issues identified during the previous stage and make necessary adjustments to the EMS. This will ensure continuous improvements to the suitability, adequacy and effectiveness of the EMS, further enhancing the organization's environmental responsibility.

An EMS can also be adopted progressively, where initial stages use easily available data, and the consequent elaboration of plans and actions go into more depth and detail. The criteria for an EMS are defined and standardized in ISO 14001, which can be used by any organization to manage its environmental impacts and enhance its environmental performance. ISO 14002, 14004, 14005 and 14006 provide additional EMS guidance.

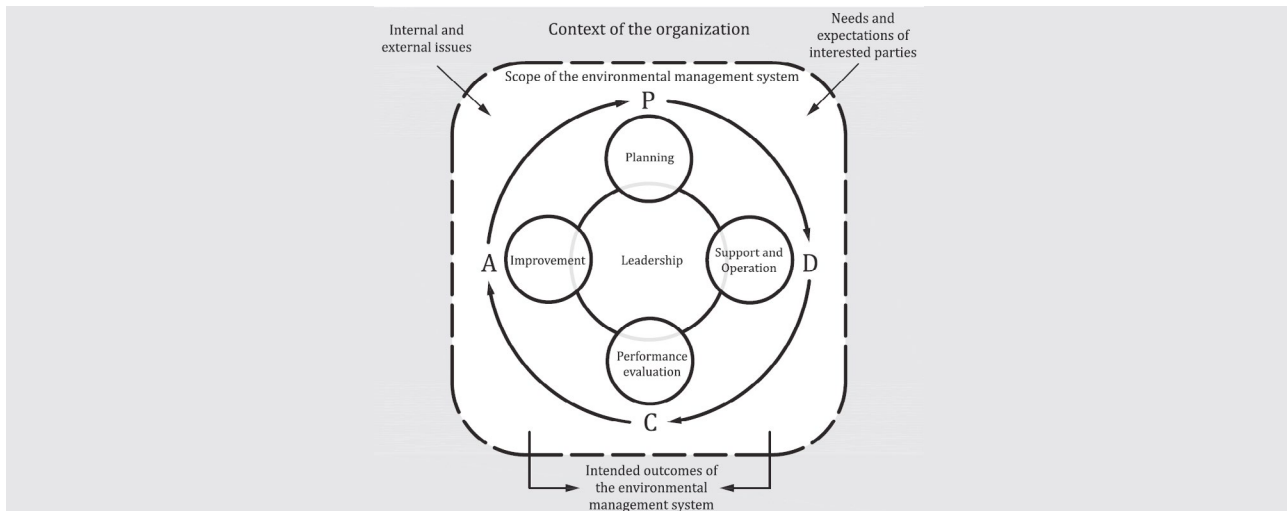


Figure 1. Environmental management system model (ISO 14004:2016)

Example box: EMS of the World Food Programme

The World Food Programme has outlined several benefits of adopting an EMS within an organization, which include:

- Better stewardship of resources by identifying efficiency gains and cost savings
- Enhanced transparency and accountability to stakeholders by integrating environmental performance into the delivery of mandates
- Identification and management of environmental risks which, if left unchecked, could adversely impact the local environments of the very people the United Nations seeks to assist
- Reducing the organization's environmental footprint
- Fostering a sustainability culture by promoting behavioural changes such as fuel-efficient driving, recycling, and sustainable procurement

Learn more here:

[Environmental management at WFP](#)

Environmental action plan

To turn commitments into concrete measures, an environmental action plan can be used. This more specific document outlines the concrete measures that the organization will take to reduce environmental impacts, increase environmental sustainability, and achieve intended environmental outcomes. The environmental action plan usually follows on from the environmental policy and is used to guide the implementation of the EMS, but some humanitarian organizations have developed an environmental action plan as a stand-alone document as well. The action plan clearly specifies key elements, such as:

- Environmental objectives relevant to the organization's activities and impacts
- Actions to achieve intended outcomes
- A feasible timeline and/or deadline
- Key roles and responsibilities
- Indicators
- Resources

3.2. Environmental assessments

Environmental assessments provide the necessary evidence base for the EMS, and the foundation for measures to improve environmental performance. Understanding an organization's overall interactions with the environment is crucial to avoid, reduce and manage any potential environmental harm. Environmental assessments enable environmentally responsible humanitarian action and are critical to prevent harm to local communities and ecosystems. They also enable humanitarian projects to identify, and take advantage of, opportunities to benefit lives and livelihoods, by improving local environmental conditions.

Organizational-level assessments

In order to understand its overall environmental footprint, each organization should determine any significant environmental aspects, that is, the ways in which its operations and activities can interact with the environment. The environmental aspects usually have direct or indirect impacts on the environment, which can include:

- Emissions into the air
- Releases into water
- Releases onto land
- Use of raw materials and natural resources
- Use of energy
- Waste

Senior management should arrange a mapping of the organization's operations and activities across its different facilities and locations and assess which of these have significant environmental aspects. Day-to-day operations, as well as non-standard activities, should be comprehensively screened for actual and potential environmental impacts, including both negative and beneficial impacts. Both qualitative and quantitative data can help to identify environmental aspects, and wider consultation processes across different levels and functions of the organization might be required. The environmental aspects of purchasing goods and services from external service providers should also be considered in this process.

The key environmental aspects and associated impacts will depend on the type of organization and its operational model. Humanitarian response often requires large-scale procurement and fast logistics solutions based on a push supply chain and no-regrets approach, where a large share of the environmental impact can be attributed to supply and logistics systems. For more information on assessments of the environmental impact of the humanitarian supply chain, refer to section 3.3.

The organization's environmental objectives, targets, indicators, and subsequent measures should be based on the knowledge gained through this assessment and screening process. The information generated via environmental assessments thus provides the baseline against which progress on the organization's environmental performance can be measured and monitored. It is important to note that the assessment of significant environmental aspects is not a one-time activity, and should be undertaken periodically, especially when activities and operations are subject to change. This will enhance "the organization's understanding of its relationship with the environment" and to continuously improve its "environmental performance through enhancement of its environmental management system" (ISO 14004:2016).

Example box: Environmental Impact Toolkit of Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF)

The **Environmental Impact** Toolkit helps MSF mitigate its environmental footprint and reduce local pollution by systematically measuring major environmental impacts such as energy use, transport, emissions, and waste. The toolkit is used to identify lower-carbon actions and measures in order to avoid and reduce environmental and social impacts. With the help of the toolkit, MSF is able to reduce consumption, improve efficiencies and change behaviour within the organization to achieve more environmentally responsible humanitarian action.

Learn more about the toolkit, environmental impacts of MSF, and associated measures here:

[MSF Environmental Impact Toolkit Report](#) (2019)

Programme and project assessments

Environmental assessments during humanitarian action can directly contribute to the protection of human lives, rights, and health by identifying potential risks, such as environmental impacts including but not limited to pollution and contamination, natural hazard risks, loss and damage, potential protection concerns, or human-wildlife conflicts. Environmental-related protection risks should also be considered. Although environmental assessments and screenings can differ considerably in scope and detail, they are necessary to develop an evidence base on environmental conditions and impacts, which is a prerequisite for an efficient, effective and sustainable humanitarian response.

The information generated by an environmental assessment facilitates a deeper integration of environmental considerations in humanitarian response by evaluating the environmental consequences of the disaster itself, and of planned and ongoing activities. This helps in prioritizing response actions and in taking appropriate measures to “do no harm” and, where possible, to “do good” by improving the local environmental conditions. The benefits of conducting environmental assessments in humanitarian settings include:

- **Finding sustainable solutions** as the data collected during the assessment helps humanitarian planners to design programmes and projects that meet sustainability criteria, enhance humanitarian outcomes, and do not inadvertently expose affected communities to further environmental hazards and risks.
- **Mitigating negative impacts** induced by disasters and by subsequent humanitarian actions on ecosystems and natural resources. Early environmental impact assessments help in identifying and implementing appropriate measures to prevent or mitigate adverse environmental impacts.
- **Reducing costs in the medium to long term** by identifying resource-efficient actions and reducing the likelihood of further negative environmental consequences that could undermine humanitarian outcomes.

There are different approaches to using environmental assessments in programmes and projects, which include environmental checklists or markers, environmental screening tools, and detailed environmental assessments. Humanitarian organizations can include environmental checks and safeguards for all programmes and standard activities, and/or use environmental assessments and screening as part of any new project. Environmental assessment and screening tools include the following:

- The [Nexus Environmental Assessment Tool \(NEAT+\)](#) is a project-level screening tool for assessing the current sensitivity of the local environment in which the response and/or recovery interventions will take place. It highlights any underlying vulnerabilities and helps the user to consider potential environmental issues. It is intended principally to enhance the quality and accountability of humanitarian programming through the identification of key environmental issues. It is open-source and is adaptable to individual or organizational needs. The NEAT+ currently (May 2023) has two versions that can be used in different contexts:

- Rural NEAT+ (R-NEAT+) was the first and original version of the NEAT+ to be developed. It was officially launched in 2019, was a finalist for the UN Secretary-General's awards in 2019 and received an award from the International Association for Impact Assessment in 2020. It is applied in rural contexts using Microsoft Excel and KoBo Toolbox. R-NEAT+ consists of an Environmental Sensitivity module coupled with WASH, Shelter and Food Security sectoral activity modules.
- Urban NEAT+ (U-NEAT+), the newer version, is used in urban contexts to cater to the increasing number of crises requiring humanitarian responses in urban settings. The U-NEAT+ is a cloud-based format application that can be accessed using the online platform. Currently, it includes an Environmental Sensitivity module, coupled with Shelter, WASH, Livelihoods, and Food and Security sectoral activity modules. Waste and Health Modules sectoral activity modules are in the process of being developed.
- The [Virtual Environmental and Humanitarian Adviser \(VEHA\) Tool](#) is an online resource providing automated advice to facilitate the integration of environmental considerations into common humanitarian response planning and field-level response actions in most humanitarian sectors. It supports programme managers in elaborating key environmental activities and indicators related to their sectors and subsectors.
- The Catholic Relief Services [Environmental Stewardship Tool](#) helps the user to rapidly identify and register the risk levels from key environmental issues related to the programme activities. It improves programme design by identifying potential risks that each action may have on the environment and on people living in the programme areas. The Environmental Stewardship Tool is used during the programme design phase and prior to implementation of a project to inform stakeholders both of the risks associated with negative environmental impacts, and of the benefits of environmentally responsible operations.
- The [Green Recovery and Reconstruction Toolkit](#) includes the Environmental Stewardship Review for Humanitarian Aid, which is a tool for evaluating the environmental impacts of humanitarian projects. The Environmental Stewardship Review for Humanitarian Aid focuses on the recovery and reconstruction phases, but can be used during the early relief phase as well. The tool helps to determine likely environmental impacts and identify appropriate actions to protect people and communities. [Module 3](#) of the Green Recovery and Reconstruction Toolkit illustrates the Environmental Stewardship Review for Humanitarian Aid process.
- The [Rapid Environmental Assessment Tool](#) is a tool for quickly assessing and analysing the environmental context of a particular emergency or disaster right after it has occurred. It uses a simple, consensus-based qualitative assessment process to assess immediate impacts on the environment, including potential negative environmental impacts caused by humanitarian organizations. The Rapid Environmental Assessment Tool enables strategic and efficient response planning to mitigate identified, defined and prioritized environmental impacts in disaster situations.

Resource box: Environmental assessments

Several tools and methodologies exist to conduct environmental assessments in humanitarian contexts, each with different functions and purposes. To learn more about environmental assessments, consider the following resources:

- [Coordinated Assessment for Environmental and Humanitarian Action: Scoping Study](#)
- [EHA Connect: Assessments](#)
- [Environmental Impact Assessment Tools and Techniques \(module 3 of the Green Recovery and Reconstruction Toolkit\)](#)
- [Guidelines for Rapid Environmental Impact Assessment in Disasters \(REA\)](#)

- [The Nexus Environmental Assessment Tool \(NEAT+\)](#)
- [Integrated Strategic Environmental Assessments in Post-Crisis Countries](#)
- [Environment Marker](#)
- [Virtual Environmental and Humanitarian Adviser \(VEHA\) tool](#)
- [European Commission Strategic Environmental Assessment \(SEA\)](#)
- [UNDP's Social and Environmental Screening Procedure \(SESP\)](#)
- [WFP Environmental and Social Safeguards for programme activities – risk screening, assessment and plans \(ESS\)](#)
- [Caritas Environmental Stewardship Tool \(EST\)](#)
- [IISD ALiVE - Adaptation, Livelihoods and Ecosystems Planning Tool](#)
- [IISD Community-based Risk Screening Tool - Adaptation and Livelihoods \(CRiSTAL\)](#)
- [CARE Climate Vulnerability and Capacity Analysis Handbook \(CVCA\)](#)
- [UNHCR FRAME Toolkit: Framework for Assessing, Monitoring and Evaluating the Environment in refugee-related operations](#)
- [Climate, Environment and Disaster Risk Reduction Integration Guidance \(CEDRIG\)](#)

Explanatory box: Environmental Data

Regardless of the chosen assessment approach and methodology, relevant environmental data includes general information on:

- Land cover and land use
- Natural hazards and sources of potential environmental risks to human health
- Location of surface water and groundwater (including quality and flow data if possible)
- Location of forests, woodlands, and other potential sources of energy
- Location of environmentally sensitive sites, protected areas, and environmental sites with cultural relevance, and information on associated habitats and species
- Known indigenous land claims, land cadastres and natural resource concession boundaries
- Distribution of known resource-dependent livelihoods, and their connection with known protection risks such as illegal trade in natural resources or unofficial mining
- Location of displacement camps
- Population centres
- Human, commercial and production infrastructures, as well as roads

Geographic Information Systems, such as MapX, can be used to supplement other environmental assessments and gather missing data to support area-based approaches. Further helpful environmental data that can inform humanitarian action includes:

- Information on local weather, with available forecasts
- Climate projections
- Information on vegetation and habitats
- Information on the presence of waste and debris
- Information on signs of erosion or saltwater incursion
- Evidence of groundwater or soil contamination from flooding or wastewater overflow
- Information on degradation of habitats and protected areas

Learn more about environmental data:

- [EHA Connect: Information and data sharing](#)
- [Guidance note: Environmental data and information in humanitarian action](#)

3.3. Integration into operational processes

Following the assessment of environmental aspects and associated impacts, senior management should advance the integration of environmental management activities into the organization's operational processes, activities and functions. Each organization must determine which measures are required in order to reduce environmental impacts and maximize the benefits of environmental sustainability. Senior management must plan accordingly and provide the required resources to integrate environmental management activities and measures for environmental sustainability into the organization's operations, day-to-day activities, and projects. The leadership and direction of senior managers is important to ensure participation and maintain an effective integration process that brings value to the organization.

Integration into support operations and activities

Humanitarian organizations can improve the environmental sustainability of their support operations and day-to-day activities primarily through the EMS process and its Plan–Do–Check–Act cycle (see sect. 3.1 above). Having determined the programmatic and operational processes and activities with significant environmental aspects and (potentially) harmful impacts on the environment, senior management needs to implement measures to address these impacts and deliver on environmental objectives. Such measures are often related to the following adverse environmental impact areas:

- Greenhouse gas emissions
- Waste
- Air pollution
- Water and wastewater
- Land degradation
- Loss of biodiversity and wildlife habitats

These and other environmental impacts can occur as part of the day-to-day activities and support operations of humanitarian organizations, and at their facilities. Support operations and activities that are important to consider with respect to their environmental impacts include:

- Procurement
- Packaging and waste management⁷
- Fleet management and logistics^{8,9}
- Facilities management¹⁰
- Travel
- Information and communications technologies

It should be noted that all above areas of course are related to the implementation of programmes and projects, e.g., they should be assessed also as part of programme planning. For example, the development of procurement plans jointly by programme and supply chain colleagues can help determine market dynamics and allow the procurement of more environmentally sustainable products, as well as support suppliers with awareness on sustainability issues to improve local market conditions. However, as support functions are often situated within a different part of the organization than programme management, their specific impacts and associated management measures may also be considered separately – while ensuring the full inputs of programme functions. It is the responsibility of senior management to ensure that support operations and activities with significant environmental aspects are managed in a way that avoids or minimizes adverse environmental impacts, and that opportunities to maximize environmental sustainability are seized. To that end, necessary physical and financial resources must be provided, and operational controls should be established to follow the environmental policy and systematically manage the environmental aspects of relevant operations and activities.

Employees with environmental management competence – as well as environmental standards, procedures, and regular monitoring and measuring processes – help to control operations that have environmental impacts. While the degree of control over any outsourced processes or products and services from an external provider can be limited, it still is important to consider significant environmental aspects and associated environmental impacts, as well as the ability of the external provider to meet the necessary environmental requirements.

Example box: Green procurement at the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA)

Green procurement can significantly reduce an organization's environmental impact, through the purchase of products and services with low environmental impacts. In 2013, UNFPA launched its Green Procurement Strategy to improve the sustainability of its supply chain. Seven focus areas were identified for the strategy, namely:

- Energy consumption
- Water management
- Waste management

7. The [Joint Initiative on Sustainable Humanitarian Assistance Packaging Waste Management](#) has produced a scoping study that explores sustainability in humanitarian procurement systems and supply chains.

8. The Logistics Operational Guide provides comprehensive guidance on green logistics; see <https://log.logcluster.org/display/LOG/Green+Logistics>.

9. The Logistics Cluster has a dedicated information portal and project to address Waste Management and measuring, reverse logistics, environmentally sustainable procurement and transport, and circular economy (WREC); see <https://logcluster.org/green-logistics>

10. Module 3 of the "[Greening humanitarian aid](#)" online course by DG ECHO covers how to mainstream environmental issues in office management at the field and headquarters level.

- Recycling
- Materials and resources
- Transportation
- Chemical substitution

With the help of its procurement strategy, UNFPA seeks to improve the environmental sustainability of all aspects of its procurement activities and reduce environmental impacts, by collaborating with suppliers and establishing sustainability standards.

Learn more about green procurement at UNFPA:

- [Green procurement infographic](#) (2020)
- [Green Procurement Strategy](#) (2013)

Example box: Sustainability in logistics and supply chains

UNFPA together with the Center for Humanitarian Logistics and Regional Development (CHORD) and Kühne Logistics University undertook a mixed quantitative and qualitative analysis to measure the impact of UNFPA's humanitarian supply chain on the environment. The waste and greenhouse gas emissions of the supply chain were mapped, critical environmental issues identified and ongoing and potential mitigation measures highlighted. The analysis then zoomed in on those waste types perceived as the most critical to UNFPAs humanitarian programmes. For each waste types, their yearly volume was estimated based on procurement data and a set of assumptions. To evaluate the volumes of greenhouse gas emissions, the analysis zoomed in on one emergency medical kit and performed a life cycle assessment considering three international last-mile distribution scenarios in a complex humanitarian context. Finally, recommendations to reduce the environmental footprint in the short and medium term were made.

Learn more about the assessment here: [Reducing the impact of UNFPA's supply chain](#)

Several ongoing initiatives target the environmental sustainability of humanitarian logistics and supply chains.

The Global Logistics Cluster, with the support of a coalition of humanitarian partner organizations – Danish Refugee Council (DRC), the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), Save the Children International (SCI), and the World Food Programme (WFP), have come together to develop the **Waste Management and Measuring, Reverse Logistics, Environmentally Sustainable Procurement and Transport, and Circular Economy (WREC) Project** to produce harmonized guidance on waste management and greenhouse gas emissions, increase knowledge and awareness in the humanitarian community about green logistics, and support practitioners in environmental impact reduction, with a special focus on sustained field-based solutions. To date, the project has produced numerous waste management and recycling assessments, organized workshops, information sessions, hosted coordination meetings on green logistics issues, and has produced case studies and guidance documents in support of field operations. For more information and to explore the resources developed, see: <https://logcluster.org/wrec/green-logistics>

The **Joint Initiative for Sustainable Humanitarian Packaging Waste Management** is a multi-institutional multi-disciplinary effort to coordinate collective, impactful solutions to humanitarian packaging, supported by BHA (Bureau of Humanitarian Assistance) of USAID. The Joint Initiative has developed guidance notes on topics such as plastic alternatives in humanitarian packaging, compiled best practices of humanitarian organizations having reduced their packaging, carried out a baseline analysis on the amount of packaging waste being generated in the sector. The initiative is also collaborating with the WREC project to collect information on recycling opportunities in countries with humanitarian operations and has shared examples of humanitarian organizations' waste reduction strategies.

Integration into humanitarian programmes and projects

Environmental responsibility in humanitarian programmes and projects depends on a systematic consideration of environmental risks, policies, initiatives, practices, opportunities and benefits in programme design, implementation, and throughout the project management cycle. Key environmental issues (and their interaction with other social, political and economic factors) should be considered during project conception and initiation, because the natural environment is an integral part of the context in which the project will take place.

An environmental risk screening should be carried out during the concept development phase of a programme or project, as well as for new activities and operations. Additionally, safeguards for programming, standard operating procedures, and preparedness measures help to address environmental risks and provide the basis for measures to prevent or mitigate adverse environmental impacts as well as for environmentally sustainable approaches during future operations. In this way, environmental damage during the emergency response can be reduced or avoided, protection of the affected populations improved, and environmental outcomes in the aftermath of disasters can be improved (WFP, 2017). For further guidance, see the Mercy Corps [Environmental Screening Guide](#).

Because prevention is better than cure, senior managers should ensure that it becomes an organization-wide standard to factor in the relevant environmental dimension. Environmental risk screening, the review of country environmental profiles, and the use of environmentally sustainable activities, inter alia, will all help to improve environmental conditions as part of humanitarian programmes and projects. While each project and its context are different, some general activities and sustainable practices are almost always relevant, such as:

- Switching to clean energy solutions
- Using materials with a lower carbon footprint
- Greening logistics and supply chains
- Avoiding plastic and redundant packaging whenever possible
- Prioritizing a robust waste management system
- Applying sustainable natural resource management
- Working with local (environmental) actors and (as a minimum) adhering to national environmental rules and regulations, with due consideration of existing national and local policies, initiatives, and practices
- Analyzing and mitigating protection risks stemming from environmental considerations

Example box: Global Strategy for Sustainable Energy

In 2019, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) launched the Global Strategy for Sustainable Energy to reduce emissions, boost refugees' access to safe and sustainable energy, and minimize its own environmental impact. The strategy promotes the transition to clean, renewable energy at refugee camps and hosting sites for individual households, communal areas and support facilities. This helps to address a lack of clean energy and reduces the need to burn firewood and use diesel generators.

Four strategic action areas are promoted:

- Addressing refugee households' energy needs from the onset of an emergency
- Improving access to sustainable, safe and affordable household cooking energy
- Expanding sustainable household electrification
- Expanding sustainable electrification of community and support facilities, while reducing overall consumption

Read the full strategy here:

[Global Strategy for Sustainable Energy: A UNHCR Strategy 2019–2024](#)

To successfully mainstream the environment into humanitarian programmes and projects, the environmental actions must be in alignment with the humanitarian programme cycle. Guidance on environmental considerations and actions that are aligned to a humanitarian programme cycle can be found on [EHA Connect](#), which also provides thematic and [sector-specific guidance](#). Additionally, the [Green Recovery and Reconstruction Toolkit](#) includes guidance on how to integrate environmental considerations into different phases of the project cycle. The '[Sphere Unpacked Guide: Nature-based Solutions for Climate Resilience in Humanitarian Contexts](#)' highlights how NbS can build resilience in humanitarian contexts. It provides practical guidance for using the Sphere standards when implementing NbS, outlining opportunities for NbS within water, sanitation and hygiene, food security and nutrition, shelter and settlements, and health sectors.

Example box: Nature-based Solutions for Resilience

The term nature-based solutions (NbS) was first used in the late 2000s in the context of climate change mitigation and adaptation. In 2022, the United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA) adopted the first universally agreed definition of nature-based solutions, through its resolution on 'Nature-based solutions for supporting sustainable development'. The definition stipulated in the resolution underscores the benefits of deploying NbS for resilience building and recognises the important role they play in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and effectively and efficiently addressing major societal challenges, including disaster risks, biodiversity loss, land degradation, food security and climate change among others. (Ref: UNEA Resolution Nature-based solutions for supporting sustainable development, UNEP/EA.5/Res.5, 7 March 2022). NbS are considered an effective combination of measures to addressing climate and disaster risks. In an increasingly complex risk landscape, they provide a tool to address compounding and cascading systemic risks in a more comprehensive manner enabling cooperation across sectors. NbS as an umbrella concept covers a range of ecosystem-based approaches for different challenges and support comprehensive risk management (CRM).

Nature-based solutions can be implemented to different degrees and scales at various stages of the disaster management cycle and in different sectors. Some examples of NbS interventions in humanitarian sectors include (ref unpacked guide):

WASH:

- Use of sustainable drainage systems such as bioswales (vegetated channels) and retention basins
- Engage in community-supported green/blue "hybrid" infrastructure measures for degraded watersheds, including: removing waste from blocked waterways; restoring or protecting forests and wetlands to increase groundwater recharge and storage; restoring vegetation cover on riverbanks or slopes to minimise erosion
- Leverage faecal sludge management as a resource for biogas, combustible bricks, and soil conditioner or fertiliser for household gardens

Food security:

- Maximise available space through climate-smart agriculture practices, such as terraced landscapes
- Promote adaptation to climate change (such as selecting adapted seed varieties) that can improve food security and increase livelihood opportunities
- Stimulate demand for local, sustainably produced food products

Shelter:

- When the correct plant species are used, trees and other vegetation planted on slopes surrounding settlements can stabilise the soil and reduce the risk of landslides.
- Plan land use to provide sufficient multipurpose space for all functions. For example, areas designated to absorb seasonal flooding can also serve as communal gathering spaces
- Use nature-based solutions to provide thermal comfort and as pollution filters. For example, planting trees next to houses can provide solar shading, and green roofs can provide thermal insulation, while absorbing some pollutants.

For more examples and ideas on the application of NbS in humanitarian contexts, please refer to the [Sphere Unpacked Guide on Nature-based Solutions](#).

3.4. Training

Environmental training is the primary means of building competence, raising awareness, and developing the necessary capacities to enhance the organization's environmental responsibility. Each organization must determine its specific training needs related to the EMS or any relevant environmental dimensions of its work. Employees with designated responsibilities for the EMS and those who evaluate the organization's environmental performance internally require different competencies than the people providing humanitarian assistance in the field. Thus, humanitarian organizations should identify and address the required competency needs in order to reduce their environmental impacts and achieve their intended environmental outcomes.

Environmental training in humanitarian organizations

Humanitarian organizations that want to make environmental responsibility a part of their organizational culture should ensure that all employees are aware of and can relate to the organization's values and environmental objectives. At the same time, the organization's environmental responsibility depends on employees who are conscious of the environmental impacts on and of their work and activities. Environmental training helps to build awareness within the organization and to develop the necessary competence regarding environmental performance. When equipped with the appropriate knowledge and skills, any employee can contribute to achieving the organization's environmental objectives, regardless of their position or location.

Environmental awareness training can be used as part of an organization's onboarding, similar to the training courses on gender equality or preventing sexual harassment which are mandatory at many organizations. Environmental awareness training helps to familiarize new employees with the organization's environmental commitments and to sensitize them to these. Such training can help to educate employees about, for instance, the environmental impacts that occur in and around the organization's facilities, such as energy use and emissions, travel, waste and pollution, biodiversity loss, and use of water and other natural resources.

More specific and technical training might be necessary for people within the organization working on implementing the environmental policy and the EMS. Similarly, the work of some employees and departments can be directly related to the organization's environmental goals and targets. For instance, specific environmental competence might be required for project planners, as well as for employees working in procurement, fleet and logistics management, travel management services and so on. Senior management should provide the resources needed in order for these employees to gain the necessary competence, by means of external training programmes, on-the-job training and/or online courses.

Resource box: Environmental training

- The [Greening the Blue Tutorial](#) is designed to provide United Nations personnel with training on environmental sustainability in the United Nations system. The one-hour tutorial highlights how environmental performance is being improved in the United Nations system and how each person can reduce his or her own work-related environmental footprint.
- The e-learning on [Sida's strategic approach to Environment and Climate, the EMS](#) introduces staff and partners to how Sida reduces its environmental footprint and contributes to positive environmental performance. It guides participants through the main parts of Sida's Environmental Management System and provides information on the environmental situation in some of Sida's partner countries.
- [Becoming a Climate-Smart Organization](#) is a one-hour online course from the Climate and Resilience Academy (CARE) which helps participants understand why civil society organizations must reduce their greenhouse gas emissions and provides useful tools for doing so.
- [An Introduction to Environmental Sustainability in Humanitarian Logistics](#) e-learning course on the Global Logistics Cluster's Learning Management System.

Training on the environment and humanitarian action

There are different types of training on the environment and humanitarian action. Awareness-raising tools, such as massive open online courses (MOOCs) and other online courses, can be used to highlight the environmental dimensions of emergencies and teach participants about the benefits and opportunities of considering the environment during humanitarian operations. In addition, environmental considerations can be included in existing humanitarian training, such as the trainings provided by the United Nations Disaster Assessment and Coordination (UNDAC) mechanism, to equip humanitarians with key competencies on humanitarian-environment links. More comprehensive and technical environmental training is required to develop the skills and capacities necessary to reduce harmful environmental impacts from humanitarian operations and to manage key environmental concerns during response and recovery, such as deforestation, pollution, and disaster waste.

Training and exercises (including simulation exercises) are also necessary to increase the capacity to respond to different environmental dimensions of emergencies. For instance, an explosion at an ammunition storage facility requires very specialized response capacities. By adding environmental components or environmental injects to existing humanitarian training and exercises, knowledge gaps on environmental issues in humanitarian settings can be identified and addressed.

Integrating environmental considerations and concerns into training and exercises for humanitarian practitioners helps to:

- **Raise awareness about environmentally sustainable approaches to humanitarian action**, highlight the environmental dimensions of emergencies, and illustrate the interplay between humanitarian action, the environment, lives, human rights, and livelihoods and the role of humanitarians to promote protection, including the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment.
- **Develop capacities on key environmental concepts, tools and actions** to avoid, reduce and manage the environmental impacts of (and on) humanitarian action and deepen understanding of the potential impact on the rights to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment including into monitoring and evaluation procedures.
- **Increase coordination between humanitarian and environmental actors** through joint training to facilitate knowledge exchanges, build trust and improve collaboration.

Resource box: Training on the environment and humanitarian action

The following online training and e-learning programmes cover different environmental aspects of humanitarian action.

- The [Environmental Emergencies Centre \(EEC\) Training Centre](#) hosts several online learning modules on different environment-humanitarian topics.
- [Greening Humanitarian Aid](#) is an e-learning programme from DG ECHO that provides methodological and technical support for better mainstreaming of environmental issues into humanitarian work.
- The ICVA-PHAP learning stream on [Climate Change and Humanitarian Action](#) provides a platform for the broader humanitarian community to better understand how to reduce the impact of climate change by accelerating its own action, while also increasing environmental sustainability in line with commitments made within the Climate and Environment Charter for Humanitarian Organisations.
- Groupe URD's [online learning platform](#) includes several modules on the links between the environment and humanitarian action (in French)
- [Environmental Security and Sustaining Peace](#) (SDG Academy) provides an in-depth introduction to the multiple roles that natural resources and the environment play in the onset, escalation, and resolution of, and recovery from, violent conflicts.
- The [MOOC on Nature-based Solutions for Disaster and Climate Resilience](#) (UNEP and PEDRR) provides guidance on how to apply Nature-based Solutions in enhancing resilience to disasters and climate change through policies and action.
- [Environment and Human Mobility](#) (UNEP)
- The [Green Procurement: Tendering Criteria & Item Specifications Webinar](#) (WRC) shares information as to the implementation and usefulness of tendering criteria for green procurement.
- The [Sustainable Development in Humanitarian Action](#) (IFRC and ICRC) explores the principles and practices of sustainable development, and how to bring them to life in humanitarian organisations.

3.5. Communication

The purpose of communication about environmental responsibility is to signal the organization's environmental commitment internally as well as externally and to facilitate the implementation of the environmental policy. Open communication processes help to raise awareness among employees about the environmental concerns related to their work, create environmental commitment and coordinate environmental actions. The aim of communication is to create an active exchange of information and knowledge within the organization as well as with external parties and stakeholders. This flow of information is critical to identifying challenges as well as opportunities related to the EMS, and thus, to continuously improving the functioning of the EMS.

A communication strategy can be developed that defines the details of the information-sharing process, including:

- What should be communicated, and when
- With whom information will be shared
- How it will be communicated

Different methods facilitate the communication process and can be used internally and/or externally to encourage environmental action, flag environmental concerns and promote dialogue with interested parties. Communication methods include, for instance: departmental meetings; team briefings; informal discussions; community dialogue; network events; annual or other periodic reports; websites, social media platforms and email; press releases; advertisements; and periodic newsletters.

Internal communication

Active communication of environmental commitments, objectives, plans and responsibilities within the organization is important to enable employees to participate in the organization's environmental action and create an exchange of information and knowledge between different levels. This is crucial for the overall effectiveness of the EMS, as it helps to identify and communicate barriers, issues and opportunities within the organization. Thus, internal communication facilitates the overall implementation of the environmental policy. Its goals include:

- To increase awareness among employees about the environmental policy and important actions to achieve the organization's environmental targets, as well as to empower them to own environmentally friendly choices
- To inform employees about the overall EMS process and its purpose
- To enable employees to report concerns about environmental issues and request support on environmental aspects of their work
- To report the results of EMS monitoring and overall progress back to the employees

In many humanitarian organizations, employees are exposed to vastly different contexts depending on where in the organization they work, for example at headquarters, in regional offices or in the field. Employees at different levels and functions of the organization should be equally aware of the respective environmental concerns related to their work. Senior management championing is critical where "top-down" communication procedures can inform employees about relevant environmental commitments, as well as targets, and to coordinate environmental activities across different operations. This helps to avoid a disconnect between the environmental policy, humanitarian programmes and project activities.

At the same time, there needs to be a two-way channel that enables "bottom-up" communication, through which, for instance, project planners and field practitioners can share their experiences, flag local environmental concerns, and report the challenges and opportunities of working in a more environmentally responsible way. This is critical in order to avoid environmental sustainability being experienced as an additional burden at the field level. The communication of field-level information to senior management also helps to identify innovative solutions, share best practices and lessons learned, improve the EMS, and provide the support and resources needed to operate in the field with greater environmental responsibility.

External communication

External communication refers to any communication between the organization and external interested parties. It is used to communicate environmental objectives, actions and progress to various stakeholders, to promote dialogue, to share best practices and to signal environmental commitment. For instance, the Humanitarian Environment Network, in its [statement of commitment](#), has openly communicated its commitment to collectively halving emissions by 2030, and by at least 30 per cent by 2025. Such public communication makes an important contribution to the current momentum towards greater environmental responsibility in the humanitarian sector. It is a way to lead by example, encourage others to pursue similar environmental goals, align common actions and exchange lessons learned.

Through external communication channels, humanitarian organizations can:

- learn of the existing context-specific environment and climate change policies, programs and initiatives.
- Identify potential partners for environment and climate change action with local knowledge, experience, and presence.
- Share information on environmental performance, disclose environmental concerns and report environmental damage.
- Receive and respond to enquiries or complaints from interested parties, such as governments, donors, other organizations, and local communities.
- Have feedback systems in place that enable affected communities and individuals to be integrated in strategic, operational and policy approaches to their operations as well as assess and comment on the humanitarian assistance received including protection and access to remedy.

Feedback systems are especially relevant for reporting any environmental concerns that occurred as part of the disaster or due to the response operations. Community perspectives on local environmental issues can also be captured as part of some environmental assessment methodologies, such as the Rapid Environmental Assessment Tool. Local communities' knowledge about their environment is crucial for environmentally responsible humanitarian operations. Their participation and feedback provide an important source of learning, which helps humanitarian organizations to adapt, and improve the uptake, of environmentally sustainable approaches in the field, such as eco-sanitation measures, sustainable waste management systems, clean energy solutions and natural resource management.

Example box: Humanitarians as climate change communicators

References to climate change significantly increased in the *Global Humanitarian Overview* in 2019 and 2020, compared to earlier years. The *Global Humanitarian Overview 2021* continues this trend, describing the effects of climate change in greater detail and illustrating natural hazard trends over the past 30 years. The *Global Humanitarian Overviews* of 2022 and 2023 reference climate change trends, impacts, and vulnerabilities even more extensively. The climate crisis has become a central theme and the latest reports clearly outline an increase in climate-related disasters as well as the need for humanitarian action to be adapted to these new climate change realities. The climate crisis is fully recognized as a humanitarian crisis by now.

In this way, humanitarian organizations are uniquely positioned to make a valuable contribution to global climate change communication. Humanitarians can provide a first-hand account of how climate change and extreme weather affect vulnerable communities and can raise awareness about the effects of climate change-related sudden- and slow-onset emergencies in terms of humanitarian needs across the world. As such, humanitarian organizations play an important role in advocating for global climate action to protect vulnerable people and communities.

See also:

[IASC Key Messages: common narrative on the climate emergency and humanitarian action](#) (2021)

Resource box: Environmental networks and communities of practice

Several environmental networks, platforms and communities of practice exist which facilitate exchanges of best practices and lessons learned on various environment-humanitarian topics:

- [Environment and Humanitarian Action Network \(EHAN\)](#)
- [FEBA-PEDRR-EHAN Working Group on Nature-based Solutions in Humanitarian Contexts](#)
- [Humanitarian Environment Network](#)
- [The Global Platform for Action on Sustainable Energy in Displacement Settings \(GPA\)](#)
- [Global Shelter Cluster – Environment Community of Practice](#)
- [Global Logistics Cluster – Environmental Sustainability in Humanitarian Logistics](#)
- [Connectivity, Clean Energy and Sustainability Working Group](#)
- [Humanitarian Energy Exchange Network](#)
- [Community of Practice on Cash and Voucher Assistance, the Environment and Climate Change](#)
- [Risk-informed Early Action Partnership](#)
- [Partners for Resilience](#)

3.6. Continuous improvement

Improvement is an important component of the EMS and is necessary to enhance its suitability, adequacy, and effectiveness. Following the Plan–Do–Act–Check cycle of the EMS, organizations should identify opportunities for improvement based on the monitoring, measurement, and evaluation of its environmental performance. It is important to hold an annual management review meeting in order to periodically follow up on the EMS process and take corrective actions, which can be implemented in the environmental action plan. Through this process of analysing, evaluating, adapting, and improving the EMS, the organization can reach its targets and objectives, improve its environmental performance, and enhance its overall environmental responsibility.

Because different adjustments of the EMS require different resources, and all corrective actions cannot be taken simultaneously, the improvement of the EMS should be understood as a continuous process. Hence, continuous improvement is a way to systematically plan, monitor and implement measures for improvement. Making such continuous improvements not only reduces the environmental footprint of the organization, but can also help to reduce costs, for instance by improving resource efficiency.

Each improvement measure does not necessarily have to directly reduce environmental impacts or directly result in greater environmental sustainability. Continuous improvement can also include improvement measures that are indirectly related to an environmental objective, such as improved measuring and data analysis. For instance, an organization might identify that to achieve its objective of reducing its greenhouse gas emissions by 30 per cent, an improved measurement and inventory of greenhouse gas emissions is required at several of its facilities. While the improved measurement and analysis does not directly result in reduced greenhouse gas emissions, it is a necessary step for achieving the environmental objective.

Senior management plays a key role in the continuous improvement and maintenance of the EMS, as this requires sustained efforts across the whole organization, participation from employees, innovative approaches, and learning. The leadership of senior managers is indispensable to keeping the organization on track towards its intended environmental outcomes and sustaining a long-term vision for environmental responsibility in humanitarian operations. Key questions for senior managers relating to continuous improvement include the following:

- Is the organization doing and achieving what has been stated in the environmental policy?
- Is there sufficient progress towards environmental objectives and targets?
 - If targets are not met, what are the barriers and challenges?
 - Are appropriate measures being taken to address these barriers?
 - Are sufficient resources and capacities available to take these measures?
- How can the organization's environmental commitment be maintained?

3.7. Environmental working groups and focal points

Environmental working groups and focal points play an important role in an organization's internal environmental mainstreaming process. Their coordinating function supports the implementation of the environmental policy across the organization and also facilitates the integration of environmental considerations across the different levels and functions of the organization. Depending on the resources available to them, environmental working groups and focal points can:

- Address capacity gaps and barriers to environmental mainstreaming
- Identify opportunities for continuously improving environmental outcomes
- Coordinate environmental actions within the organization
- Provide technical environmental expertise
- Monitor environmental objectives and report on the progress made in achieving them
- Provide a system for giving and receiving feedback on environmental performance
- Communicate successes within the organization and in the wider humanitarian sector

Example box: Green Response Working Group

First launched in 2014, the Green Response Working Group is a coalition of Red Cross and Red Crescent National Societies, and IFRC and ICRC representatives, which is led by IFRC. It works to strengthen the environmental sustainability of the Movement's programmes and operations.

The Green Response Working Group has made valuable contributions to the field of environment and humanitarian action, through sustained efforts to integrate greener practices in humanitarian operations, to support national societies in starting to green their own organizations, and to advocate for environmental sustainability in the humanitarian sector.

Learn more here:

- [IFRC Green Response](#)
- [Red Goes Green: Barriers and enablers for effectively greening practices and strengthening environmental sustainability across the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement](#)

4

Glossary

4. Glossary

It should be noted that there is, in part, considerable overlap and discrepancy between terms applied within environmental management, climate change and disaster risk domains. For example, mitigation in the climate change domain refers to the reduction or prevention of greenhouse gas emissions, where it in the disaster risk reduction domain refers to the lessening or minimizing of the adverse impacts of a hazardous event. In environmental management, mitigation typically refers to addressing the potential adverse environmental impacts of the organization. The following key terms are of relevance:

Climate change adaptation: The adjustment in ecological, social or economic systems in response to actual or expected climatic stimuli and their effects or impacts. This includes the processes, practices and structures used to moderate potential damage, or benefits from opportunities associated with climate change.

Climate change mitigation: Efforts to reduce or prevent the emission of greenhouse gases (into the atmosphere) by reducing the sources of greenhouse gases and/or enhancing the capacity of “sinks” to accumulate and store these gases.

Please note that the concepts “adaptation” and “mitigation” are used slightly differently in the disaster risk reduction/management context.

Continuous improvement: An ongoing, long-term approach to improving processes, products and services, for instance with respect to their environmental impacts.

Ecosystem: A dynamic complex of communities of plants, animals and microorganisms and their non-living environment, interacting as a functional entity.

Ecosystem service: A benefit that people obtain from one or several ecosystems.

Ecosystem restoration: The practice of assisting the recovery of ecosystems that have been degraded or destroyed, as well as conserving ecosystems that are still intact.

Environment: The sum of all physical, chemical and biological surroundings in which people, organizations and societies exist and which, in turn, they influence. It provides life-supporting natural resources and determines the quality of the surroundings in which people live. The environment needs to be protected and managed if these essential functions are to be maintained. A healthy environment can enhance disaster response and recovery.

Environmental aspect: The elements of an organization’s activities, products or services that interact or can interact with the environment. Environmental aspects can be direct or indirect, depending on the organization’s degree of control over the activity, product or service.

Environmental degradation: Any adverse change or disturbance to the environment, including the deterioration of natural systems through the depletion of natural resources such as air, water and soil; the destruction of ecosystems; the extinction of wildlife. A degraded environment can further threaten disaster-affected populations.

Environmental footprint: The sum of impacts that a person, organization or activity has on the environment, for instance in terms of consumption of natural resources, emission of greenhouse gases, and the production of waste.

Environmental impact: Any change in the environment as a total or partial result of an organization’s environmental aspects. Environmental impact can be adverse or beneficial, though the term more commonly denotes adverse impacts, unless stated otherwise.

Environmental mainstreaming: The systematic and informed inclusion of relevant environmental concerns into an organization’s decision-making, policies, rules, plans, investments and actions.

Environmental management system: A set of processes, internal rules and practices that enable an organization to reduce its adverse impacts on the environment. This system defines how an organization will identify, monitor and control its interactions with the environment.

Environmental management: A set of coordinated decisions and activities concerning the organization's interaction with and impact on the environment. Guiding principles of environmental management include sustainability, a precautionary approach, pollution prevention, polluter pays, cumulative impacts, intergenerational equity and public participation.

Environmental objective: A clear and specific intended environmental outcome or goal that the organization wants to achieve in the short, medium or long term. Environmental objectives build off the environmental policy, should be attainable, and usually entail a more detailed set of targets.

Environmental performance: The measurable results of an environmental management system, which indicate the organization's ability to manage the environmental aspects of its operations and activities. Environmental performance is assessed on the basis of the organization's environmental policy, commitments, objectives and targets.

Environmental policy: The statement and mechanism by which an organization formally commits to improving its environmental performance. It is a framework for action to avoid, reduce and manage environmental impacts.

Environmental responsibility: The duty to operate in a way that avoids and mitigates adverse environmental impacts. This includes an organization's commitment to reduce its overall environmental footprint as best as possible, while being accountable for any environmental harm it incurs.

Environmental sustainability: The capacity to meet the needs both of current generations and of future generations without compromising the ecosystem components and functions that fundamentally sustain these needs.

Green procurement: Decisions, when buying products and services, that include environmental considerations along with price and quality.

Green response: An approach to improve the environmental sustainability of humanitarian operations and to avoid, minimize and manage the damage caused to the environment and the climate. Green response also involves the ways in which humanitarian response and recovery can improve local environmental conditions.

Resilience: The ability of individuals, households, communities, cities, institutions, systems and societies to prevent, resist, absorb, adapt, respond and recover positively, efficiently and effectively when faced with a wide range of risks, while maintaining an acceptable level of functioning and without compromising long-term prospects for sustainable development, peace and security, human rights and well-being for all.

Sustainable development: An organizing principle and approach to meet the needs of present generations without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. Sustainable development is typically conceptualized in the form of three pillars: the environment, the economy, and society. A fourth pillar, "culture", is sometimes included in the concept as well.

5

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6

Annexes



Annex A:

Sector-specific adverse environmental impacts and measures to prevent or mitigate them

The table below gives examples of different adverse environmental impacts related to humanitarian sectors and highlights some measures to address these. The table is based on the Groupe URD [scoping review of the environmental footprint of humanitarian action](#), of 2020, by Samantha Brangeon and Frances Crowley as well as the [Guidance on the operationalisation of the minimum environmental requirements and recommendations for EU-funded humanitarian aid operations](#), of 2022, by the European Union and the [Sphere Unpacked Guide: Nature-based Solutions for Climate Resilience in Humanitarian Action](#), of 2023, by Sphere, FEBA, IUCN, PEDRR, EHAN and IFRC.

Sector(s)	Environmental impacts	Measures to address
Food and livelihoods	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Food packaging waste, including plastics (local impact) • Overexploitation of natural resources linked to income-generating activities (local impact) • Deforestation linked to types of dry food distributed to beneficiaries that require significant amounts of fuel for cooking (local impact) • CO2 emissions from food transportation (global impact) • Deforestation, CO2 emissions and soil contamination linked to the distribution of unsustainably produced food items (global impact) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Systematic consideration of energy-efficient cooking solutions in food assistance programmes • Promotion of locally purchased food • Promotion of sustainably produced food and efficient water management practices • Local alternatives to palm oil: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Groundnut production ○ Use of sesame oil ○ Growing soya • Use indigenous and biological means and techniques over chemical-based fertilizers and pesticides, avoiding highly hazardous pesticides • Use of nature-based solutions for food and livelihood assistance • Avoid charcoal making as a livelihood or income generation activity, and favour alternative and sustainable jobs

Sector(s)	Environmental impacts	Measures to address
Shelter and settlements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Soil deterioration/excavation due to brickmaking for shelter construction (local impact) • Overexploitation of wood/ deforestation linked to tarpaulin or plastic sheeting distribution (local impact) • Plastic waste being generated by low-quality tarpaulins and/or by non-recyclable packaging in kit distribution (local impact) • Soil erosion linked to unsustainable sand and gravel extraction from rivers for shelter construction (local impact) • Deforestation/desertification linked to the presence of settlements and the need for cooking and heating fuel for refugees (local impact) • Soil erosion and irreversibility of land use due to the presence of settlements (local impact) • Cutting down trees to set up camps (local impact) • Improper location of settlements, e.g. in nature reserves or along animals' migration routes (local impact) • Deforestation/desertification linked to the construction of shelters, including their purchase from unsustainable sources (local and global impacts) • CO2 emissions linked to international transport of wood and other non-food items in shelter programmes (global impact) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promoting sustainable construction materials, including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ The reuse and recycling of materials for shelter construction, including of debris ○ Using stabilized soil blocks instead of fired bricks in shelter construction. Production of stabilized soil blocks does not require any wood and reduces the use of water by 30 to 60 per cent ○ Promoting the use of sustainable timber in humanitarian programmes ○ Distributing plastic sheeting only when necessary and limiting plastic waste by choosing higher-quality plastic sheeting which has a longer lifespan • Avoiding deforestation and removal of vegetation as much as possible • Link to existing infrastructure, facilities and livelihoods as much as possible • Consider energy systems for cooking, lighting, powering/charging and heating/cooling, ensuring affordability, sustainability, safety and appropriateness • Promote the salvaging of solid waste in a safe and dignified manner • Complement shelter programming with blue-green infrastructure such as terraces to address landslide risk and bioswales to address rainfall or drainage • Greening refugee operations from the start • Using vouchers

Sector(s)	Environmental impacts	Measures to address
Water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Plastic packaging waste linked to hygiene kit distributions (local impact) • Groundwater and surface water contamination linked to sanitation activities, e.g. inappropriate placement of latrines or inappropriate sludge management (local impact) • Groundwater contamination and salinization linked to the construction of boreholes (local impact) • Water table depletion caused by unregulated pumping, defective infrastructure, inappropriate analysis of the aquifer or lack of coordination between WASH actors pumping from the same aquifer. Water outtakes sometimes exceed the replenishment of water sources (local impact) • CO2 emissions caused by water trucking and pumping (global impact) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased monitoring of water tables • Increase the use of solar energy in WASH programmes • Use of sustainable natural resource management practices in humanitarian projects such as water reuse • Apply integrated landscape assessments and flood management practices like wetland restoration • Roll-out of eco-sanitation solutions and multipurpose water supply solutions • Prioritize use of renewable energy in the operation and maintenance of water services • Favour nature-based solutions such as constructed wetlands as part of faecal sludge management processes while ensuring a risk-based approach • Increased monitoring of contractors • Linking humanitarian, development and peace activities for more sustainable outcomes (humanitarian-development-peace nexus)
Health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Soil, water and air contamination due to disposal and dumping of medical and hazardous waste (local impact) • Ecological damage caused by the widespread use of insecticides and spraying for vector control (local impact) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Making better use of pre-existing hospital safety assessment tools (based on World Health Organization standards) • Following guidelines on how to implement high standards of waste management • Enhance the sustainability of facilities and warehouses • Promote circular healthcare systems by optimizing raw materials and minimizing waste • Collaborate on land restoration projects that offer health benefits, such as shelterbelts that reduce exposure to dust and the design of green spaces that provide mental health benefits and double as safe spaces for communities

Sector(s)	Environmental impacts	Measures to address
Nutrition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Packaging waste (local impact) • Transport and logistics for therapeutic food items are managed by two different United Nations agencies (UNICEF for severe acute malnutrition and WFP for moderate malnutrition). Two distinct supply chains result in an overall greater environmental footprint (global and local) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Greening the production of ready-to-use therapeutic food and of the associated packaging and waste, mainly through reduction of waste, establishment of bring-back systems and improved recycling • Consider localizing production and supply chains for support to local economy, reduction of transport emissions and less waste due to cultural factors
Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of environmental awareness and environmentally unsustainable habits may increase negative environmental impacts, for example through increased felling of trees or overuse of water (local impact) • Unsustainably built or managed educational facilities can contribute to pollution, for example from latrines (local impact) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Include environmental and climate change awareness in lesson plans • Integrate environmental and climate-friendly activities in day-to-day running of schools • Enhance the sustainability of educational facilities through renewable investment and water conservation • Implement nature-based solutions for heating/cooling of educational facilities
Logistics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Greenhouse gas emissions associated with transport, storage and distribution of goods and personnel (global impact) • Resource use due to manufacturing of goods and packaging • Use of resources for infrastructure such as sand, gravel, wood • Greenhouse gas emissions, wastewater and waste from offices and buildings (local and global impacts) • Generation of waste including packaging, fuel, vehicle batteries, waste oil and tires (local and global impacts) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Apply learnings from existing efforts to green procurements, logistics and supply chains • Map and optimize fleet, packing practices and transport routes, focusing on preparedness and localization, where possible and justified • Consider the environmental impact of relief items over their life cycle • Reduce waste and wastewater emissions and manage waste, including from packaging • Ensure sustainable resource extraction • Green office and warehouse activities, install renewable energy

Sector(s)	Environmental impacts	Measures to address
Protection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of access to water or energy may increase protection risks associated with water or firewood collection (local impact) • Existing or emerging environment-impacting practices of affected populations can exacerbate protection risks (e.g., illicit trade in wildlife, mining, trafficking of natural resources or illicit drugs can be interconnected with trafficking in persons, worst forms of child labour, and/or smuggling of migrants) • Information materials and resources used in protection programmes may lead to waste (local impact) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Protection actors to consider instances where natural resources may contribute to protection risks and/or conflicts • Protection activities like child-friendly spaces to, jointly with other sectors such as WASH and logistics, develop joint approaches for waste management, renewables and natural resource management
Cash and voucher assistance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Environmental impacts related to cash and voucher assistance tend to be less obvious, often indirect, and more difficult to identify • Cash assistance can result in people buying poor-quality resources and materials that have adverse environmental impacts (local impact) • Depending on local market structures, cash and voucher assistance might increase the purchase of imported goods with a higher carbon footprint (global) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promote green solutions and sustainable local production related to cash and voucher assistance • Link cash-for-work projects with environmental restoration and waste management • Include environmental considerations in market assessments to estimate the sustainability of goods and services • Mix in-kind assistance with cash and voucher assistance in order to limit environmental impacts

Annex B:

Current initiatives and processes

1. The first [strategy for sustainability management in the United Nations system](#) was endorsed in 2019 by CEB. The strategy covers the years 2020–2030 and builds on existing successes achieved via the United Nations-wide Greening the Blue campaign. In 2021 the CEB endorsed the [Strategy for sustainability management in the United Nations system, 2020-2030 - Phase II: Towards leadership in environmental and social sustainability](#). Sustainability Strategy II is a comprehensive sustainability strategy encompassing a fuller picture of environmental and social sustainability in UN system policies, programming, and support functions. Sustainability Strategy II contains a draft scorecard to measure progress towards entity-level outputs, and is currently (May 2023) being finalized and piloted.
2. 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 was established in 2013 with the objective to mainstream environmental considerations in humanitarian action. The Secretariat of the EHA Network is the UNEP/OCHA Joint Environment Unit. Founded in 1994, it helps Member States prepare for and respond to environmental dimensions of emergencies.
3. The [Clean Energy Challenge](#), launched by UNHCR in 2019, seeks to bring businesses, governments and organizations together to provide green and safe energy to populations that have been forcibly displaced. It is a collective effort by individuals, governments, businesses and organizations across the world to replace costly and unsustainable sources of energy – such as petroleum, coal, or biomass such as firewood – with clean and modern energy sources to power households, schools, clinics and humanitarian operations.
4. The [Global Platform for Action on Sustainable Energy in Displacement Settings](#) is the global initiative to promote actions that enable sustainable energy access and use in displacement settings, as laid out in the accompanying [Framework for Action](#). The Global Platform for Action strives to remove barriers to energy access in humanitarian settings by providing a collaborative agenda for energy and development and for humanitarian partners to deliver concrete actions under Sustainable Development Goal 7 for displacement contexts. It promotes and contributes to the humanitarian sector's transition to renewable energy, which will increase efficiency and reduce costs as well as carbon emissions.
5. USAID is facilitating the multi-institutional and multidisciplinary [Joint Initiative on Sustainable Humanitarian Assistance Packaging Waste Management](#) effort to coordinate collective and impactful solutions in the area of humanitarian packaging. The Joint Initiative completed its initial [scoping review of sustainability in humanitarian supply chains](#) in 2020 and has since produced multiple resources to showcase potential solutions to the packaging challenge, including packaging sustainability criteria, guidance notes and a compendium of best practices.
6. The cross-network [FEBA-PEDRR-EHAN Working Group on Nature-based Solutions in Humanitarian Contexts](#) brings together different stakeholders to form a comprehensive community of practice. It develops practical guidance, policy recommendations and advocacy messaging to elevate and advance consideration of nature-based solutions and environmental safeguarding in humanitarian action.
7. ICRC, IFRC and the Red Cross Red Crescent Green Response Working Group have launched a four-year project to mainstream sustainability in humanitarian supply chains (covering procurement activities, fleet management, transportation, air operations and so on). The Sustainable Supply Chain Alliance has an interim Teams communication group where activities, documents and results will be shared. Interested organizations can contact Kathrine Vad (kvad@icrc.org) or Carmen García Duro (cduro@icrc.org) to become part of the communication group.
8. IFRC Green Response initiatives seek to improve the environmental sustainability of the work of IFRC, as well as to avoid, minimize and manage any damage caused by its operations to the environment and the climate; see <https://www.ifrc.org/green-response>.

9. The BRE Trust is developing a life cycle assessment calculator for the humanitarian shelter sector which helps to quantify the wider environmental impacts of construction activities and reduce the long-term environmental impacts of shelter and settlement interventions; see <https://www.bretrust.org.uk/knowledgehub/lca-for-the-humanitarian-sector/>.
10. The Climate Action Accelerator is a not-for-profit association that aims to mobilise a critical mass of community organisations in order to scale up climate solutions, contain global warming below 2°C and avoid the risk of dangerous runaway climate change. A specific workstream of the association aims at supporting humanitarian organizations in achieving net-zero emissions; see <https://climateactionaccelerator.org/>.
11. The [Environment and Humanitarian Assistance – What, Who, Where-to-Find-Out-More Matrix](#) (2021) provides a quick overview of different environment-focused activities linked to humanitarian operations. It is maintained by the Global Shelter Cluster Environment Community of Practice.
12. The Global Logistics Cluster hosts an [Environmental Sustainability in Humanitarian Logistics Project \(WREC\)](#). The WREC Project seeks to reduce the adverse environmental consequences of humanitarian logistics through awareness, practical guidance, and real-time environmental expertise. The project is coordinated by the Global Logistics Cluster and supported by a coalition of humanitarian organizations - the Danish Refugee Council (DRC), the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), Save the Children International and the World Food Programme of the United Nations - with input from all Logistics Cluster partners, other humanitarian clusters, the private sector, and academic partners.

Annex C: Current initiatives and processes

The list below contains only a few broad examples of environmental commitments that relevant for humanitarian organizations. These examples can serve as an initial inspiration for organizations looking to increase their commitment to environmentally responsible operations and sustainable outcomes.

Area of action	Example environmental commitment
Environmental management	Implement and maintain an environmental management system
Environmental policy	Develop, implement and improve an environmental policy, and ensure compliance with it
Natural resources	Use and manage natural resources in a responsible and sustainable manner
Energy	Reduce energy consumption, use sustainable energy, and transition to renewable energy
Greenhouse gas emissions	Assess and reduce the carbon footprint and offset (unavoidable) carbon emissions
Do no harm	Prevent harm to local communities and ecosystems by assessing and reducing the environmental impacts of support operations, activities, and humanitarian programmes and projects
Pollution	Avoid, reduce and manage any air, land and water pollution
Supply chain management	Improve the environmental sustainability of supply chains, and implement green procurement and logistics
ICT	Reduce ICT-related environmental impacts, including emissions, consumption, waste and energy
Waste management	Implement the five Rs of waste management organization-wide: Refuse, Reduce, Reuse, Repurpose, Recycle
Disaster waste management	Prioritize the sustainable and safe disposal, management and reduction of disaster waste, including of hazardous materials
Ecological restoration	Rehabilitate, regenerate and restore degraded lands, sites and ecosystems
Local communities	Empower local communities to manage their natural resources sustainably and benefit from ecosystem functions and services
Resilience	Strengthen the resilience of local communities and social-ecological systems beyond the short term, and develop their capacity to adapt to climate change
Livelihoods	Promote and support sustainable livelihood practices
Environmental advocacy	Raise awareness about environmental concerns in the humanitarian context and advocate for better consideration of the environment in the humanitarian sector

Area of action	Example environmental commitment
Environmental knowledge	Train and educate staff, and other organizations, to enhance the environmental responsibility of humanitarian operations
Travel and transportation	Reduce travel-related environmental impacts, and adopt green policies and practices in the areas of travel and transportation
Events	Reduce the environmental footprint of events, by introducing sustainability criteria and reducing the consumption of materials and resources
Global environmental action	Align the organization's strategic direction with global environmental agendas to tackle the planetary crisis
Senior management	Integrate environmental improvement into the performance requirements for senior management
Employment	Integrate environmental responsibility into staff recruitment, competencies and codes of conduct, and into guidelines and/or employment contracts

