

GREENING THE SYSTEM: A Vision for a Green Humanitarian Future



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About the partners

GLOW Consultants (Private) Limited, based in Pakistan, is a leading national entity providing practice solutions and field implementation support to donors, their implementing partners and research institutions. GLOW has successfully completed more than 100 third-party monitoring and evaluation assignments

The Pacific Islands Association of Non-Government Organisations (PIANGO) is the major regional non-governmental organisation in the Pacific islands, with membership in its 24 countries and territories. For over 25 years PIANGO has served the Pacific through strengthening and building the capacity of the civil society sector, giving it a voice in policy formulation and development, and strengthening National Liaison Units (NLUs) and umbrella organisations in member countries.

About Humanitarian Advisory Group

Humanitarian Advisory Group (HAG) was founded in 2012 to elevate the profile of humanitarian action in Asia and the Pacific. Set up as a social enterprise, HAG provides a unique space for thinking, research, technical advice and training that contributes to excellence in humanitarian practice. As an ethically driven business, we combine humanitarian passion with entrepreneurial agility to think and do things differently.

Humanitarian Horizons 2021-24

Humanitarian Horizons 2021–24 is the second iteration of HAG’s partnership-based, sector-wide research program. Focusing on the Asia and the Pacific regions, Humanitarian Horizons aims to progress thinking on the role of the humanitarian sector and produce evidence about ways to achieve better outcomes for crisis-affected people. The program is funded by the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT).

The research program for 2021–24 builds on achievements of the Humanitarian Horizons pilot phase (2017–18), the previous iteration of the program (2018–21) and HAG’s experience in supporting the sector for almost 10 years. The research is structured into three interlocking streams: 1) Power, People and Local Leadership 2) Greening the System and 3) Real-Time Analysis and Influence. It is underpinned by a fourth stream comprised of governance, accountability and monitoring, evaluation and learning processes.

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Abbreviations

AAP	Accountability to Affected Populations
ACTED	Agency for Technical Cooperation and Development
B Corp	Benefit Corporation
DFAT	Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade [Australia]
DG ECHO	Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations
GPA	The Global Platform for Action on Sustainable Energy in Displacement Settings
GLOW	GLOW Consultants (Private) Limited
Groupe URD	Groupe Urgence Réhabilitation Développement Association
HAG	Humanitarian Advisory Group
IASC	Inter-Agency Standing Committee
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
IFRC	International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organisation
IPCC	Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change
IUCN	International Union for Conservation of Nature
NEAT+	Nexus Environmental Assessment Tool
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NLU	National Liaison Unit
PIANGO	Pacific Islands Association of Non-Government Organisations
SIDA	Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency
TC	Tropical Cyclone
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNEP	United Nations Environment Programme
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
WASH	Water, Sanitation and Hygiene
WFP	World Food Programme
WWF	World Wildlife Fund

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Executive Summary

Humanitarian actors are faced with the accelerating imperative to improve the environmental and closely related social impact of their activities. Scientific research, humanitarian imperative, organisational codes of conduct, national legal frameworks and wider international agreements set expectations for humanitarian organisations and their partners in this regard.

However, high-level policy and rhetoric has not always translated into substantive, impactful change at the response level. Many humanitarian actors implement programmes that have climate change adaptation objectives, yet face significant barriers to their implementation and progress. While this is a global problem, the Asia-Pacific region presents its own specific obstacles to collectively greening humanitarian action.

In order to address these challenges, we the humanitarian sector can gain significant insight from building a shared vision of what a green humanitarian system could look like. With a vision to aim for, there is scope for the sector to collectively develop a roadmap of what needs to happen in order to improve socio-environmental outcomes.

This paper, developed in partnership with GLOW (Pakistan) and the Pacific Islands Association of Non-Governmental Organisations (PIANGO) (Fiji), presents our vision for a green humanitarian system. It strives to elevate discussion and promote fresh thinking from within the sector, based on evidence and grounded in the lived experience of people and communities participating in and directly impacted by humanitarian action.

WHAT THIS PAPER DOES

- Sets the scene by reviewing and unpacking existing evidence and understandings of the humanitarian sector's socio-environmental impact.
- Presents new insights gained through consultations with a diverse range of governmental, operational, and civil society stakeholders, and builds an evidence base for what a green humanitarian system could look like.
- Identifies key focus areas for improving socio-environmental outcomes in humanitarian action, and unpacks barriers and enablers for change needed across the sector identified from the early research.
- Recognising that the vision is not static, puts forward steps towards further building and strengthening a collective vision of what a greener humanitarian system could look like.



KEY FINDINGS: OUR SHARED VISION

Our vision for a greener humanitarian system comprises three sections.

Section 1 introduces our vision, identifies the overarching problem and establishes the importance and need for a green humanitarian response. It draws upon the well-documented evidence base which makes clear the projected impacts which threaten the vulnerability of populations as a result of the climate crisis, and details the existing good practice and progress, and the negative environmental and climatic impacts which result from humanitarian action and operations.

Section 2 identifies focus areas within the vision identified as central to improving socio-environmental outcomes in humanitarian action. These focus areas speak to how we as a humanitarian sector:



Protect habitats and their inhabitants: All humanitarian operations have a net positive impact on the habitat and biodiversity of crisis-affected areas.



Race towards NetZero: All humanitarian operations reduce the majority and offset the remainder of Scope 1, 2 and 3 emissions to become NetZero.



Choose clean energy solutions: All humanitarian operations are 100% powered by clean energy.



Tackle waste: All humanitarian operations systematically employ circular economy approaches to enhance waste management systems globally.



Use water: Humanitarian operations strive for water outcomes that promote human dignity, recognising its physiological, psychological, cultural, spiritual and environmental importance.

Section 3 articulates pathways to achieving the vision, addressing key barriers to and enablers of a green humanitarian system, as well as complementary benefits of greener humanitarian action, environmental protection, and climate change mitigation and adaptation that emerged from the research.

Barriers to a greener humanitarian system include:

- Environmental considerations are often perceived as additional or aspirational components of humanitarian action, and addressed often as secondary to higher priorities despite not being mutually exclusive.
- Gaps exist between policy objectives and the systematic, practical integration of these into established or default response mechanisms that can be difficult, laborious, or costly to update.
- A lack of meaningful implementation of greener initiatives from the sector has hindered efforts to normalise environmental and climatic integrity in operations.
- Power dynamics embedded in humanitarian systems continue to exclude or marginalise local and Indigenous actors – who are often directly impacted by climate change and environmentally damaging humanitarian action – from decision- and policy-making processes.

Enablers of a greener humanitarian system include:

- Increasing salience of climate change and environmental issues, both in the Asia-Pacific region and globally. Public and private sector support for improved socio-environmental outcomes can be leveraged to increase the speed and scale of change in the humanitarian sector.
- A strong evidence base supporting the imperative for, and benefits of a greener humanitarian system can stimulate further shifts in choices towards more environmentally sustainable practices.
- Motivation and momentum is sustained and improved by broad visibility and awareness of progress in changing systemic norms in the humanitarian sector.
- Complementary agendas in humanitarian action mean that a greener humanitarian system also improves outcomes in localisation, the cash agenda, quality funding, accountability to affected populations, and inclusion.

The vision put forward in this paper is ambitious. This is intentional, as it enables us as a sector to illuminate barriers and enablers to improved outcomes that may remain masked by existing norms and practices. The vision is not static, but a starting point which will evolve and progress with further collaborative research that challenges us in greening our humanitarian system.



Section 1: The Why – Why this paper?

The climate crisis is the greatest humanitarian crisis confronting the world; its impacts – both direct, and indirect – will have serious and irreversible consequences for societies, biodiversity and ecosystems should we fail to act now. All life is dependent on the health of our earth and its natural systems.

This paper puts forward a shared vision for a green humanitarian system that eliminates harmful impacts and enhances environmental health, in line with the global imperative to reach a NetZero future. It identifies the systemic barriers at play and explores avenues to overcome them, aiming to guide the humanitarian sector towards a green response.

SETTING THE SCENE

The world we live in

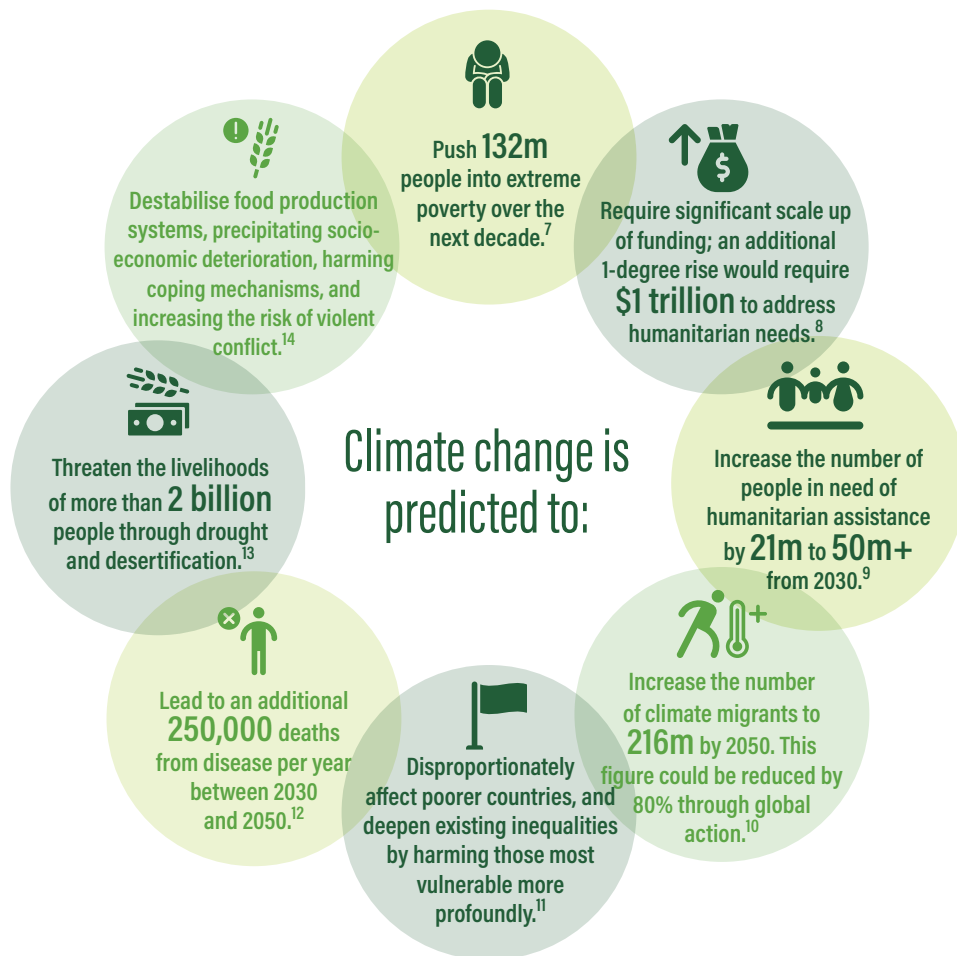
Our relationship with the natural world is becoming increasingly unstable. Irrespective of increasingly frequent and sombre warnings from global bodies,¹ we continue to engage in harmful activities that are reducing biodiversity and causing the ecosystems upon which we depend to disappear. We continue to exploit natural resources, burn fossil fuels and clear forests and natural habitat. Approximately 75% of land environments and 66% of marine environment have been degraded severely by human activities.² While our civilisation has flourished, it has been achieved at the expense of our natural systems, with the results being water scarcity, land degradation, deforestation, ocean acidification, rising sea levels and soaring global temperatures.³ Our health and wellbeing over the long-term are dependent on the preservation of our earth and its systems, both living and non-living. Improving the health of our planet is parallel to our humanitarian mission – to save and preserve life.

The impacts for the humanitarian system

The humanitarian system – in step with the global system – is at a critical crossroads. The impacts of climate change are predicted to exacerbate human suffering, increase humanitarian crises in both frequency and severity, and increase already unmet pressures on the humanitarian sector to address global needs. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) released the second and third instalments of its Sixth Assessment Report earlier this year. In what United Nations (UN) Secretary-General António Guterres described as “*an atlas of human suffering and a damning indictment of failed climate leadership*”,⁴ their findings illustrate that with a 1.1°C increase in global temperatures, climate change has already inflicted large-scale irreversible damage to ecosystems and is having profound impacts on the livelihoods and security of millions around the world, while climate-related disasters are increasing in frequency and intensity.⁵ Critically, reports have warned the world faces a 48% chance of warming of 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels in the next five years, albeit temporarily.⁶

The global climate crisis is projected to both increase and exacerbate global humanitarian needs. Figure 1 gives an alarming snapshot of those needs.

Figure 1: Projected humanitarian impacts of climate change



The evidence base shows overwhelmingly that scale-up of actions across all sectors is needed to respond to the climate emergency. There is an ongoing imperative to meet increasing humanitarian needs, as well as reflect on how those needs are being met.

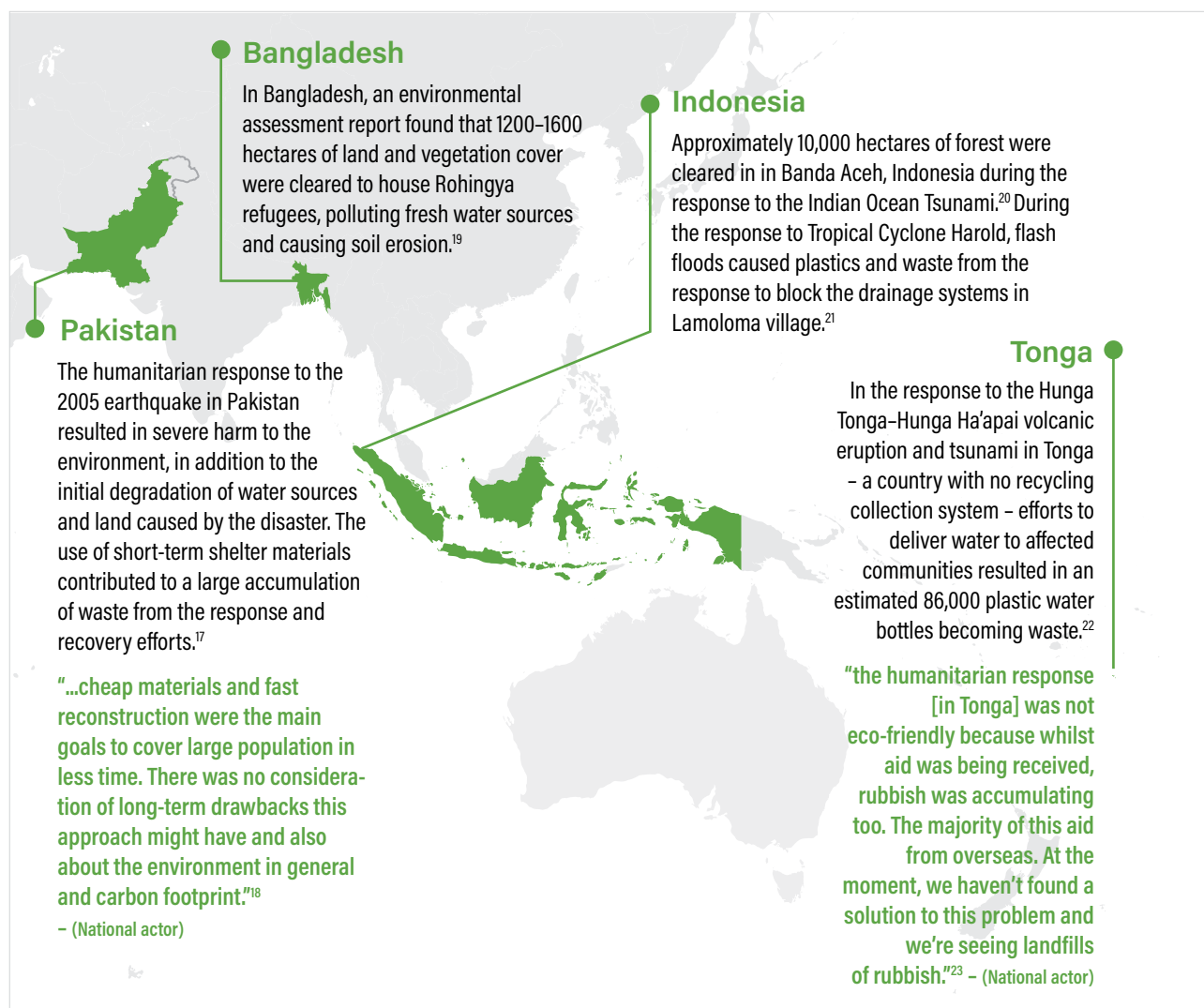
Our vision for a green humanitarian system addresses the issues of **both climate change, and environmental change**, and how the sector can better adapt to mitigate and reverse negative impacts. The impacts of climate change are produced via atmospheric conditions from greenhouse gas emissions, resulting in rising sea levels, temperature rise and changing weather patterns, while environmental change refers to changes to the earth's natural systems in locales,

regions or globally. Impacts due to environmental change include biodiversity and species loss and fragmentation.¹⁵ Interaction between the two occurs during instances where emissions are produced from deforestation and soil erosion, and when damage is caused to biodiversity and ecosystems as a result of rising temperatures and changing weather patterns, leading to more frequent and intense climate-related disasters, ocean acidification and rising sea-levels. As a result, these inflict harm upon our natural systems, while thriving natural habitats play a role in mitigating climate change impacts, through absorbing and storing carbon.¹⁶ Mitigating and reserving negative climate environmental change through our operations is critical for reaching a green humanitarian system.

As humanitarians, we have been part of the problem.

Increasing evidence gathered from small- and large-scale humanitarian responses highlights the multitude of ways in which humanitarian action itself is affecting the climate and harming the natural environment. Examples of negative impacts during crises in the Asia-Pacific region are provided in figure 2 below:

Figure 2: Impacts of humanitarian action in Asia and the Pacific



These examples highlight the further damage caused as a result of failing to integrate environmental and climate-conscious considerations into humanitarian action for both the environment and the lives and livelihoods of affected populations. Environmental degradation and global warming can reduce the resilience of communities by posing risks to public health, increasing the vulnerability of populations to future disasters, and damaging soil and agricultural environments.²⁴ In the post-disaster period, a focus on environmental resilience and health is critical to ensuring the well-being of communities in the long term and mitigating risks to future disasters. This can only be achieved through reducing emissions and mainstreaming environmental considerations into humanitarian operations.



MOMENTUM IS BUILDING

In response to mounting evidence of the impact of humanitarian action on the environment, there has been a significant amount of progress. There are many examples of good practice that can be built upon. This section highlights some of these promising practices.



WREC Project

The Waste Management and Measuring, Reverse Logistics, Environmentally Sustainable Procurement and Transport, and Circular Economy (WREC) – coordinated by the Global Logistics Cluster – enables humanitarian logistics partners to reduce negative environmental impacts in their operations through awareness, practical guidance, and real-time environmental expertise by engaging all Logistics Cluster members, other clusters, the private sector and academic bodies.²⁵

- **In practice:** humanitarian actors are greening their approaches. Initiatives such as the Red Cross Red Crescent Movement's (IFRC) Green Response, Mercy Corps' commitment to cut its global emissions by 50% by 2030,²⁶ and the Global Platform for Action on Sustainable Energy in Displacement Settings (GPA), among others, demonstrate intent and progressing towards developing, testing, measuring and reporting on how operations are shifting towards more environmentally sound practices.

ZERO ACTED's 3Zero Vision

ACTED has developed a 3Zero vision of Zero Exclusion, Zero Carbon and Zero Poverty. The vision aligns with the principles of the European Green Deal and UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals. Acknowledging that climate change and environmental degradation will affect the most marginalised people most severely, ACTED commits to progress operational and organisational greening, identifying local and global solutions to climate change that focus on the most vulnerable, and upscaling programming related to fighting climate change and preserving the environment.²⁷

- **In learning and guiding:** humanitarian actors are actively seeking advice on how to improve their practices. For example, the International Council of Voluntary Agencies and Professionals in Humanitarian Assistance and Protection co-hosted a learning series on Climate Change and Humanitarian Action; it provided insights for non-governmental organisations (NGOs) across a range of interrelated topics. The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) Joint Environmental Unit, established in 1994, provides a host of tools that can support agencies. The GPA provides a forum for actors to navigate barriers to sustainable energy use in humanitarian and development settings.

Green Recovery and Reconstruction Toolkit

The World Wildlife Fund (WWF) has developed a toolkit and training program designed to build knowledge, awareness and capability with respect to environmentally responsible disaster response approaches. The toolkit, for humanitarian organisations, conservation practitioners, government officials, communities and donors, is designed to ensure that disaster preparation and recovery account for vulnerability to future disasters and the realities of climate change.²⁸

- **In policies and commitments:** the Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (DG ECHO) has been a global frontrunner in supporting greening the humanitarian system. DG ECHO's initiatives include funding the seminal *Environmental Footprint of Humanitarian Assistance: Scoping Review*, their recently published *Minimum Environmental Requirements and Recommendations*²⁹ and providing training to agencies (both DG ECHO partners and non-DG ECHO partners) on greening humanitarian aid.³⁰

The Climate and Environment Charter

The Climate and Environment Charter for Humanitarian Organizations demonstrates that sector stakeholders support reducing harm to the environment caused by humanitarian action. The charter has seven commitments aimed at strengthening shared commitment to adapt and respond to the climate crisis through humanitarian action.³¹

As of August 2022, 303 organisations had signed the Charter.³²



WHY A VISION FOR A GREEN HUMANITARIAN SYSTEM?

Despite the evidence that outlines the impact of humanitarian action on the environment and the increasing range of initiatives demonstrating progress in moving beyond mitigating harm to the environment, there is insufficient cohesion across the sector. Even with global initiatives, a sector-wide uptake of commitments, initiatives and frameworks remains absent, which has compromised collectively progress towards that desired end state. Thus, while there are already enablers of green practice, they are currently being overwhelmed by obstacles to greater progress. These dynamics have been incorporated into the proposed vision.



Applying a behavioural lens to the problem

Behavioural science principles help us to understand what drives or prevents human behaviour from taking place. As humans, we tend to overweight the present and discount the future, even when we have good intentions with respect to future behaviours. This tendency, which reduces incentives to promote long-term sustainability, is referred to as *hyperbolic discounting*. In order to create the change we need at the scale and pace required to overcome the enormity of the environmental challenges we are facing, there needs to be more consistent longer-term thinking within the humanitarian system.

Research has demonstrated that immediate, short-term thinking that has less than ideal consequences can be overcome by 'future-focus priming' – individuals imagining themselves in a future state in order to inform present-day decisions.³³ This is why understanding the impacts of climate change as described above is essential, but it doesn't stop there.

Having a shared vision makes the future state more vivid and seem more tangible. The presence of a vision also acts as a goal. The action of goal-setting is hugely motivating for individuals. A shared vision has also been shown to overcome barriers between groups³⁴ and the use of collective language used in this report (such as 'we' and 'our') is reflective of this. A more detailed overview of the barriers to and enablers of collective action on environmental progress is provided in Section 3.

Establishing a vision for a green humanitarian system provides general and specific objectives to strive for. With an end point in sight, there is scope to collectively develop a roadmap of what needs to happen to achieve it, and to track progress along the way.

This paper presents our vision for a green humanitarian future. It does not seek to comprehensively explore the fields of climatic science, or articulate pathways to emissions reduction from a technical standpoint. Our vision instead strives to elevate discussion and promote fresh thinking from within the sector to explore new opportunities and overcome the systemic barriers identified in our findings. The proposed vision is not designed to be static; we will continue to build upon/refine it over the course of the Greening the System research stream.

HOW DID WE GET HERE?

Methodology

The research described herein was jointly designed and implemented by Humanitarian Advisory Group (HAG) and research partners GLOW Consultants (Private) Limited and the Pacific Islands Association of Non-Government Organisations (PIANGO). The methodology was designed to build a strong evidence base, engaging a diverse range of stakeholders in assessing common good practices, barriers and areas of opportunity. Research tools and methods were designed, reviewed and adjusted to each partners' region of focus and stakeholder base. Data collection consisted of key informant interviews, focus group discussions and a desk review of the key literature; a behavioural science framework was applied in the analysis phase, and HAG's ethical framework guided the research process.

Grounded in lived experience, the qualitative research data produced in this study is idiographic and thus does not seek to make generalisations. Rather, the methods used are effective in generating rich, targeted insight. The paper is best read as an initial part of a broader research program which is iterative by design, in that it uses both inductive and deductive reasoning to build understanding over time. Inductive qualitative research serves to ground the data in lived experience, which is in turn used to build an aspirational vision for what the humanitarian sector can look like. This vision will then be used as a launchpad to explore barriers and opportunities associated with improved environmental outcomes in the humanitarian sector.

Stakeholders represented a wide range of organisations at the donor and government level: civil society, NGOs, international non-governmental organisations (INGOs), UN agencies, the Red Cross Red Crescent Movement, and rights groups across the operational, international, national and local levels. Participants reported diverse areas of expertise, including in clean energy, conservation and restoration, environmental science, medicine and health, supply chain management, and logistics.

Figure 3 below provides a snapshot of the methodology approach.

Figure 3: Methodology



Section 2: The What – A shared vision for a green humanitarian future



OUR VISION FOR A GREENER HUMANITARIAN SYSTEM IS THAT THE HUMANITARIAN SECTOR CAN SAVE LIVES TODAY AND TOMORROW.






Our restructured choice to become environmentally sustainable and accountable across all areas enables us to go beyond doing no harm, actively promoting and protecting people and planet.

“ ‘the solution is to change the thinking of the people. It’s not only about food, shelter and clothes...its about the oxygen that is very important for our survival. Change of attitude is very important. Use things that have less impact on the environment, are reusable and renewable.’³⁴ National actor

The Foundations

- ✓ **Principled humanitarian action** is defined by protection and promotion of the climate and the environment
- ✓ **All humanitarians are individually and institutionally** upholding and promoting environmental responsibilities
- ✓ A greener humanitarian system is a more **localised humanitarian system**
- ✓ **Donor support and messaging is coordinated, consistent and continuous;** the ‘cost’ of environmental stewardship is considered and accepted
- ✓ **Goals are shared by all stakeholders,** including the private sector and environmental agencies

Key Focus Areas — OUR VISION for how we:

-  **PROTECT HABITATS AND THEIR INHABITANTS** — All humanitarian operations have a net positive impact on the habitat and biodiversity of crisis affected areas.
-  **RACE TOWARDS NETZERO** — All humanitarian operations reduce the majority and offset the remainder of Scope 1, 2 and 3 emissions to become NetZero.
-  **CHOOSE CLEAN ENERGY SOLUTIONS** — All humanitarian operations are 100% powered by clean energy.
-  **TACKLE WASTE** — All humanitarian operations systematically employ circular economy approaches to enhance waste management systems globally.
-  **USE WATER** — Humanitarian operations strive for water outcomes that promote human dignity, recognising its physiological, psychological, cultural, spiritual and environmental importance.

THE FOUNDATIONS

A series of foundational components underpins this vision. These elements are crucial to ensure that the entire humanitarian system shifts towards becoming more sustainable, in addition to progressing in specific areas.

Principled humanitarian action is defined by protection and promotion of the climate and the environment

“It’s about improving the quality of life, through the environment.”³⁶

In a green humanitarian system, a shared understanding of what defines principled humanitarian action includes environmental safeguarding at its core.³⁷ In this humanitarian future, protection and preservation of life extends to protection and preservation of the crisis environment, alongside protection of planetary health³⁸ overall.

“Organisations have Do-No-Harm policies for human rights safeguarding; however, the “Do No Harm” to the environment policy is missing. It is important to acknowledge that [a] clean environment is a human right.”³⁹

There has been significant progress in some areas of the sector on strengthening the concept that environmental preservation is central to humanitarian action. For example, IFRC’s Green Response initiative acknowledges that Do No Harm extends beyond protection of human life to include the environment,⁴⁰ while the European Consensus on Humanitarian Aid, agreed by all (at the time) 28 EU member states in 2007 also reflects this.⁴¹ However, in a green humanitarian future there is scope to further extend our approach to environmental protection. Rather than doing no harm, we can have a net positive impact on the environment through humanitarian action. Protecting and restoring the environment will be central to how we are accountable to affected populations.

“Understanding this concept requires unlearning of the old understanding and relearning the new. The new self and attitude that is not only peoples centric but being mindful of the environment and natural resources as well.”⁴²

All humanitarians must individually and institutionally uphold and promote environmental responsibility

“[We] need to empower the generalist humanitarian [with knowledge about] how to tackle it.”⁴³

In a green humanitarian system, environmental stewardship is everyone’s responsibility.⁴⁴ Whilst there is still a need for specialist expertise, environmental safeguarding will not be only the concern of specialist individuals or agencies. Across the system, stakeholders have comprehensive and accessible user-friendly information and tools, and education opportunities to build their capabilities. The culture within humanitarian organisations reflects this shift, with collective buy-in and a shared understanding of how being held accountable for unintended environmental impacts of our actions is a core feature of our work. Processes that screen, measure and report on environmental health are embedded in organisational, response and program systems rather than being standalone processes.⁴⁵ Whilst this journey might start with compliance, it should leverage and extend our compassion for protecting humanity.

“The capacity-building of operational staff is extremely important, along with the environmental sensitive planning.”⁴⁶

A greener humanitarian system is a more localised humanitarian system

“ ‘Over the years, our communities have responded to humanitarian crises through traditional means. These practices are greener than how humanitarian respondents are currently responding. They work with less to no technology, equipment, chemicals and even packaging.’⁴⁷

A green humanitarian system is a more localised humanitarian system.⁴⁸ Humanitarian actors support local preparedness, response and recovery initiatives that promote, protect and conserve the environment.

“ ‘There is a huge disconnect between top-level stakeholders and the grassroots people. The response done is not addressing the needs and urgency on the ground.’⁴⁹

Governments in crisis-affected countries can be empowered to push back on offers of support that do not meet environmental standards and objectives.⁵⁰ When host governments request support, their partners' support should meet pre-determined expectations. When equipment and supplies do not meet standards or needs, donors must be responsible and held accountable for removing the supplies after their use and ensuring safe, environmentally responsible disposal if required.⁵¹ A more localised system is also one in which local relief supplies are sustainable, available and prioritised. Procurement of sustainable materials that are also locally procured not only supports local economies, but reduces emissions related to manufacturing and transportation.⁵² When non-traditional materials are required, they must be procured as locally as possible and manufactured using ethically sourced sustainable supplies.

Donor support and messaging is coordinated, consistent and continuous; the ‘cost’ of environmental stewardship is considered and accepted

“ ‘Partners have been asking for coordination; the worst-case scenario would be donor requirements diverging.’⁵³

A green humanitarian system hinges on aligned, consistent and strong messaging from donors to responding partners. It includes coordinated and consistent donor commitments, approaches, standards, requirements, and funding allocations when supporting implementing agencies during humanitarian crises.⁵⁴ The humanitarian sector has seen examples of such coordination before, such as scaled cash transfer programming coordinated across a range of donors, recognising *‘the need for improved donor coordination and coherence and to clearly communicate a shared vision for cash’*.⁵⁵

Goals are shared by all stakeholders, including the private sector and environmental agencies

“ ‘Sectors are very siloed – it’s a mindset of individuals. If you get the right person things will flow. But it really shouldn’t be up to individuals.’⁵⁶

In a green humanitarian system, all parts of the system need to work towards the same objectives.⁵⁷ Processes within a green system enable conversations and actions which facilitate stronger relationships and collaboration between stakeholders. The siloes between humanitarian actors and conservation agencies should be dismantled, thereby enabling the humanitarian sector to leverage the expertise of environmental and conservation agencies to learn from their experience, and vice versa.⁵⁸ Private sector partners are core stakeholders; all partners' belief in a shared vision is critical in ensuring that humanitarian action is truly sustainable.⁵⁹

“ ‘We will need to speak in unison to push for this shift. We need champions and leaders who are willing to put their necks on the line for this to be effective.’⁶⁰

KEY FOCUS AREAS

In addition to the core elements that are central to achieving the vision, five primary areas of focus (discussed below) have emerged as priorities within principal humanitarian clusters such as WASH, shelter, protection and health, and must apply across the system. Acknowledging the complexity of climate change, the environment, humanitarian principles and the interrelated systems, these identified areas are not exhaustive and can be augmented throughout the life of this research program.



How we protect habitats and their inhabitants

“ ‘We must provide pathways for global development that work with, rather than against nature, and we need to give the communities affected a seat at the table.’⁶¹

David Attenborough

Our actions in humanitarian response often come at the cost of natural systems. Deforestation, biodiversity loss and the degradation of natural resources result from our failure to mainstream environmental considerations into humanitarian action.⁶² Response to acute humanitarian needs has often led to a zero-sum prioritisation of immediate life-saving measures over long-term environmental concerns, but these are not mutually exclusive. If humanitarian response and environmental sustainability are acknowledged as closely interrelated, even to the point of recognition that environmental sustainability is a humanitarian imperative, the strengthening of ecosystem health and resilience simultaneously strengthens community health and resilience.



Spotlight example: Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh

The persecution of the Rohingya minority in Myanmar's Rakhine State drove approximately 621,000 refugees across the border into Cox's Bazar in Bangladesh in 2017, generating huge demand for shelter and other assistance. The absence of land use planning led to the emergence of risks to the environment, public health and safety. An estimated 1200–1600 hectares of vegetation was cleared, and hills cut for shelter construction, harming natural water sources and causing habitat loss, fragmentation of wildlife territory, soil pollution and ground water source depletion.⁶³ Damage to soil and natural habitat produced additional threats to the refugee population. Eighty-three per cent of water samples tested at sources and households were found to be contaminated, necessitating costly delivery of clean drinking water to refugees. Meanwhile, soil erosion and environmental degradation posed risks of landslides and worsened resilience to extreme weather or disaster.⁶⁴

OUR VISION FOR NATURE:



All operations have a net positive impact on the habitat and biodiversity of crisis-affected areas.

What does a humanitarian system that considers impacts on nature look like?

“ ‘How do you treat the environment in your actions? ... we need a more integrated approach which really looks at the impact.’⁶⁵

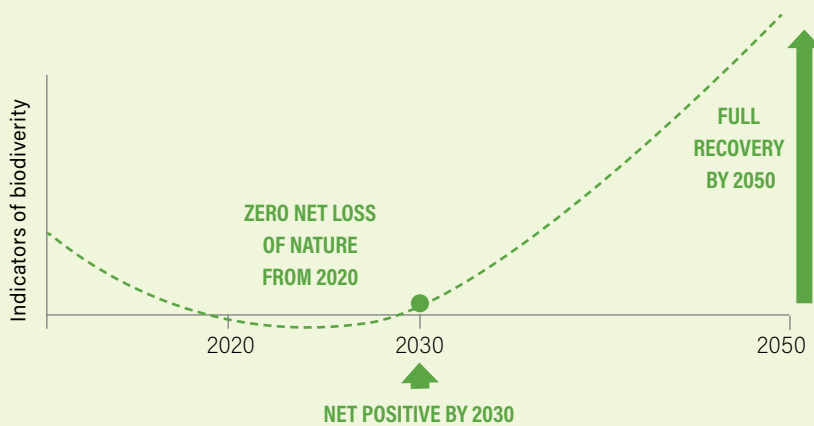
In a green humanitarian system, all forms of environmental degradation in our operations are ceased. The values of traditional knowledge and environmental science collectively guide our actions, ensuring our operations are underpinned by environmental justice. Nature-based solutions –

which have the potential to reduce the intensity of climate change impacts and weather-related hazards by at least 26%⁶⁶ – are mainstreamed, strengthening the health and resilience of ecosystems and biodiversity, and simultaneously supporting the restoration and regeneration of natural habitat. In a green humanitarian system, we are guided by the Global Goal for Nature; our operations both cease and reverse nature loss, safeguarding the integrity of our earth’s natural systems and supporting the resilience and regeneration of ecosystems and biodiversity to ensure a full recovery by 2050.⁶⁷

Global Goal for Nature

The Global Goal for Nature is an initiative designed and established by a consortium of conservation and environmental science contributors in 2021. With comprehensive scientific justification from 78 academic publications, it puts forth the case to reach a nature-positive future by 2030, underpinned by the following targets: Zero Net Loss of Nature from 2020; Net Positive by 2030; and Full Recovery by 2050. The goal aligns to the commitments of global frameworks and conventions: the UN Convention on Biological Diversity; the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change; the Paris Agreement; the UN Convention to Combat Desertification; and the Sustainable Development Goals. The working paper advocates for the full mitigation hierarchy to avoid biodiversity loss through ecological restoration and regeneration to reach full recovery of nature by 2050.⁶⁸

Figure 5 - Global Goal for Nature: Nature Positive by 2030



(Adapted from Locke, Rockstrom, Bakker et al. (2021) A nature positive world: the global goal for nature, p. 4)

How do we get there?

1. Conduct land and environmental assessments in preparation for response and operation

Humanitarian actors must mainstream environmental consideration and management into the planning stages of response. In doing so, spatial planning processes take place in the pre-operation stage to identify



environmental fragilities, while scientific-informed assessments underpin strategies to safeguard natural ecosystems and biodiversity specific to environmental context in the response and recovery stages. Indigenous and local communities are consulted to advise and guide the response, informing context-appropriate best practice approaches. Key Biodiversity Areas (KBA)⁶⁹ are avoided to protect native species, while land rights are upheld and adhered to in the policy design stage, ensuring the protection and security of indigenous populations.

2. Increase knowledge and capacity to operate with environmental integrity

Environmental trainings must be delivered to increase organisational knowledge and awareness, strengthening our knowledge about the distinctive environmental impacts generated from crises, disasters and humanitarian operations. The *Nexus Environmental Assessment Tool* (NEAT+), WWF's *Green Recovery and Reconstruction Toolkit* and the International Union for Conservation of Nature's (IUCN) *Nature-based Solutions in Humanitarian Contexts Guidance Toolkit* (among others) must inform our operations to prevent biodiversity loss and damage of ecosystems, through all stages of our approach: preparedness in the pre-crisis/disaster planning stage, the response during the emergency, recovery in the aftermath of the emergency, and mitigation. We will use comprehensive monitoring, evaluation and learning frameworks to assess our impact and guide our efforts to enhance our environmental approach through lessons learned and shared accessible data. Humanitarian and environmental agencies will establish coherent environmental policies and management strategies with the donor community, ensuring flexible and adequate funding for nature-based approaches in humanitarian action.

“ ‘Nature-based solutions ... are actions to protect, sustainably manage and restore natural and modified ecosystems in ways that address societal challenges effectively and adaptively, to provide both human wellbeing and biodiversity benefits.’⁷³ IUCN Global Standard for Nature-based Solutions



Spotlight initiative: the Nexus Environmental Assessment Tool

The NEAT+ is a screening tool, developed by the UNEP/OCHA Joint Environmental Unit along with other humanitarian and restoration agencies, that enables identification of areas of environmental concern prior to response and recovery operations. The tool identifies specific environmental vulnerabilities associated with various humanitarian actions, enabling agencies to mitigate environmental impacts and ensure sustainable approaches during interventions.⁷⁰

3. Nature-based solutions are mainstreamed to ensure a nature positive recovery

Our operations must be underpinned by long-term recovery strategies that benefit nature, resilience and the needs of affected populations collectively. We will increase our coordination with conservation and restoration agencies, whose expertise can help us systematically integrate a nature-based approach into primary humanitarian clusters: WASH, shelter, protection, food security and nutrition and health, ensuring a sector-specific approach to humanitarian action that incorporates environmental protection in various contexts.⁷¹ Cross-sectoral linkage mechanisms must also be established, allowing for maximum complementarity of effectiveness in a humanitarian response, such as the integration of climate change adaptation initiatives in disaster risk reduction programs, and sustainable sourcing and procurement of supplies in shelter operations to avoid environmental damage. In coastal areas, our interventions will mitigate damage to coral reefs, while reforestation activities use appropriate native plant species and consider upstream/downstream water impacts.⁷²



How we race towards NetZero

“If we don't see significant and sustained emissions reductions this decade, the window of opportunity to keep 1.5 [°C] alive will be closed – and closed forever ... Tougher net-zero standards and strengthened accountability around the implementation of these commitments can deliver real and immediate emissions cuts.”⁷⁴ António Guterres (2022)

Emissions are produced from all facets of humanitarian operations. Based on the running of our offices, transportation and logistics in delivering aid supplies, powering our responses, and in our supply chains and external operations, estimates show the humanitarian sector has a significant carbon footprint.⁷⁵ However, despite the availability of emissions tracking and reduction tools (most notably the Greenhouse Gas Protocol) and many organisations adopting some form of emissions-

tracking practices, the full scope of emissions is rarely calculated.⁷⁶ Figure 6 below depicts categories of emissions, all of which are relevant to the humanitarian sector.

A lack of commitment to adequately measure emissions has compromised the ability to take action. The New Humanitarian's survey of 24 international humanitarian organisations (2021) illustrated a significant shortfall in emissions reporting and reduction commitments among many of the sector's largest and most influential actors:

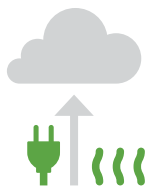
- Only 3 were adequately measuring the full scope of their emissions
- 17 were measuring emissions generated across a limited range of their activities
- 4 could not provide an estimate of their emissions
- 10 were engaging in carbon offsetting practices
- Only 5 had established organisation-wide emission reduction targets.⁷⁷

Figure 6: Scope 1, 2 and 3 Emissions



SCOPE 1

Direct emissions are generated from sources owned and controlled by an organisation such as stationary and mobile combustion sources, vehicles and generators.



SCOPE 2

Indirect emissions which occur in the consumption of electricity, and the procurement of steam, heat and cooling.



SCOPE 3

Emissions from sources external to an organisation refer to purchased goods and services, capital goods, external energy and fuel activities, waste generation in operations, business travel and commuting, extraction of resources and manufacturing of materials in supply chains, emissions produced by associated business partners and the end-of-life treatment of distributed products. Also referred to as indirect emissions.

(Adapted from EcoAct's *carbon accounting tool for humanitarian organisations*⁷⁸)

As these findings illustrate, current practices in the humanitarian sector are not coherent and will not lead to accountability for its carbon footprint.



Spotlight issue: procurement and supply chains

A lack of reporting on emissions generated by sources external to humanitarian organisations but vital to their operations (scope 3 emissions) is a major environmental concern. Scope 3 emissions may occur from the materials used and sourced by an organisation for supplies, as well as from logistics and other operations involved in inter-organisational procedures. Data shows that indirect emissions can account for a significant proportion of organisations' emissions.⁷⁹ For example, for 2019, ACTED estimated that 44% of its emissions resulted from its supply chains, while for ICRC the figure was 66%.⁸⁰

Common barriers to sustainable procurement in supply chains are a preference for a cost-efficient approach to formalising partnerships with suppliers over sustainable approaches; beneficiaries rarely being consulted about their needs; and the urgent focus on saving lives taking priority over ethical supply procurement.⁸¹

“We need to have zero carbon emissions ideally in as many humanitarian operations as possible.”⁸² National actor, Pakistan

OUR VISION FOR NETZERO



All humanitarian operations reduce the majority of Scope 1, 2 and 3 emissions and offset the remainder to become NetZero.

What will NetZero look like?

In achieving NetZero operations, we will have ensured clear visibility across all facets of our emissions production, from our offices to our operations. The Carbon Accounting Tool for Humanitarian Organisations will be standardised across the sector as the uniform tool for tracking emissions. By ensuring complete transparency across our emissions generated across scopes 1, 2 and 3 (see figure 6 above), we will have identified and differentiated our emissions sources, and built in mechanisms specific to each in order to facilitate decarbonising our operations.

In a NetZero system, donors have established regular and comprehensive emissions reporting requirements for humanitarian actors across their monitoring, evaluation and learning frameworks, while international organisations lead on supporting their offices and national partners to measure, reduce and offset emissions. Partnerships with private sector organisations who share our commitment are increasingly common, and we work with our suppliers and external partners to ensure a joint approach to business operations through which our supplies are sourced and produced sustainably.

1. We lower emissions as much as possible

Reducing emissions as much as possible is the priority pathway. Increasing procurement of local supplies and leveraging the existing traditional knowledge of communities on sustainable local materials is integral. Coordinated, pooled supplies reduce duplication, as does pre-positioning as locally as possible, thereby minimising freight and transportation emissions. Scaled cash transfer programming enables downscaling of emissions related to transportation, as well as alleviating waste.⁸³ COVID-19 has demonstrated that air travel is less necessary than we thought; across the system, we continue to optimise remote ways of working to reduce emissions from flying.

“ ‘Sure, there are certainly reasons people might need to get on a plane. But there are also plenty of scenarios where we don’t need people to jump on planes to facilitate a workshop for a day or two, or conduct a few interviews, or where the skills exist in-country. The last few years have shown programs work perfectly well with remote support.’⁸⁴

2. What we can’t reduce, we offset

When the generation of emissions becomes unavoidable – for example, through indirect emissions or international travel that cannot be replaced– we commit to offsetting all emissions we produce through certified carbon credit processes. We contribute towards initiatives that reach shared standards to enhance our mutual accountability to quality credits, allowing collective measurement, transparency and quality control.



Quality of emissions credits – why it matters

One of the prevailing challenges with carbon offsetting is around assuring quality standards of the credits – essentially, ensuring that the credits are achieving what they claim to achieve. The quality of offsets is established by assessing five primary criteria, which hold that greenhouse gas reductions are:

- Additional (they would not have occurred in the absence of a market for offsets)
- Not overestimated
- Permanent
- Not claimed by another entity
- Not associated with significant social or environmental harms.⁸⁵

Credits or offsets that are not ‘high-quality’ may not be verified to a standard that can assure they are reaching the goals they are claiming. All stakeholders should act ethically to ensure the highest quality of carbon offset.⁸⁶



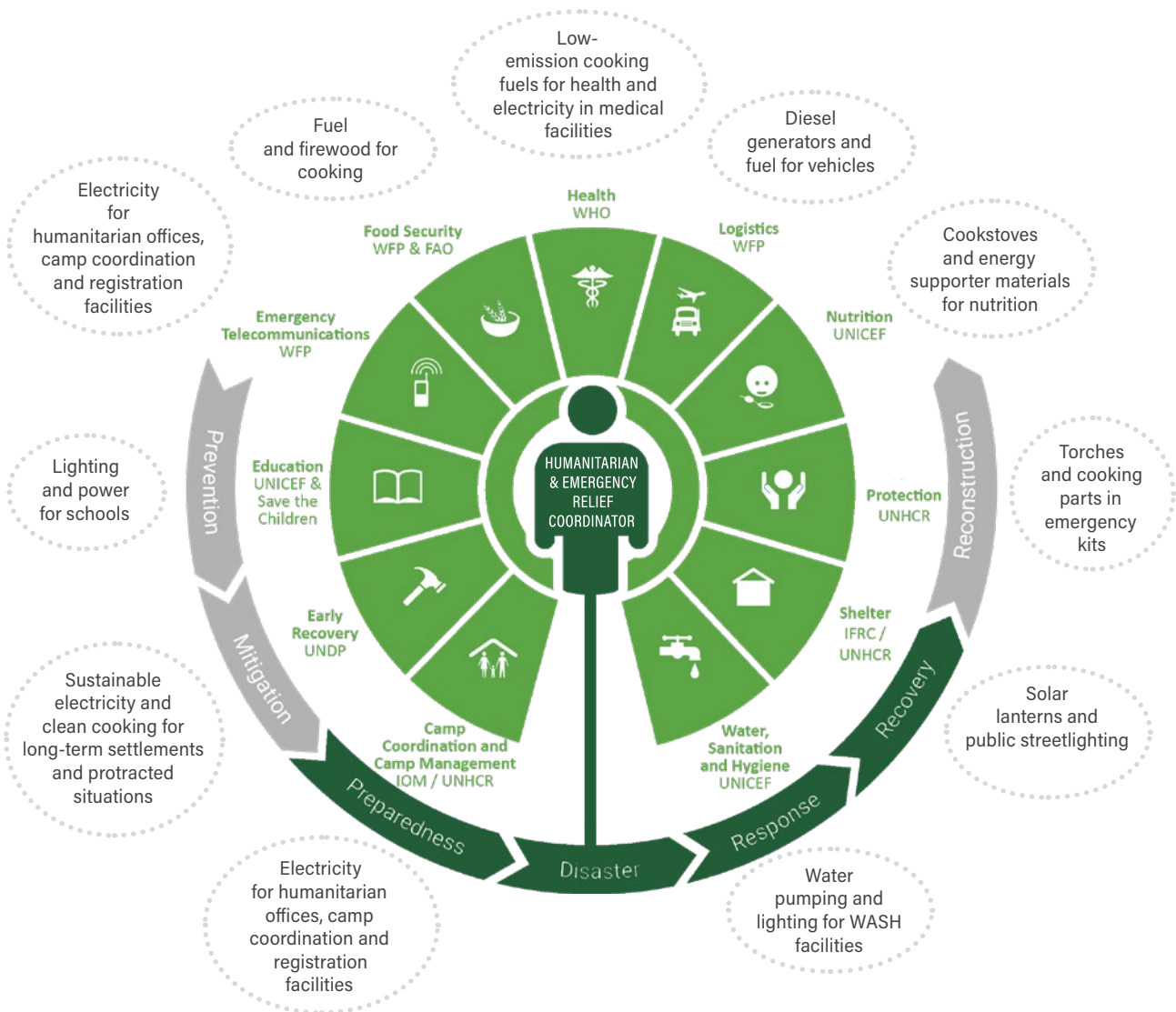


How we choose clean energy solutions

“Energy is the dominant contributor to climate change, accounting for about 60 per cent of total global greenhouse emissions.’ Sustainable Development Goal 7⁸⁷

A clean energy transition is critical – both globally and for the humanitarian sector – with two thirds of global emissions being produced from the energy sector, positioning it as the main contributor of emissions causing the global climate crisis. Energy plays a critical role in the humanitarian system. It is a ‘basic need for all’⁸⁸ and a fundamental enabler of all facets of operations (such as the provision of heating/air conditioning, lighting and cooking facilities, and powering medical equipment, water treatment and distribution, and communication services, as well as schools and offices).⁸⁹ Figure 7 details the diverse use of energy across the humanitarian sector. Sustainable energy planning has largely been absent in humanitarian priorities, blocking its integration at the policy and operational levels, while it remains largely underfunded by donor agencies.⁹⁰

Figure 7: The cluster system with examples of energy use



(Adapted from Thomas PJM, Rosenberg-Jansen S, Jenks A (2021) Moving beyond informal action: sustainable energy and the humanitarian response system, Journal of International Humanitarian Action, 6(21))

“ ‘What we see now is a baseline of willingness to change, but a fundamental inability to change. The vast majority of [humanitarian] organisations produce energy via diesel generators. [It would take] only ten minutes of work for contractors to replace diesel generators with renewable energy in contracts.’⁹¹

OUR VISION FOR ENERGY:

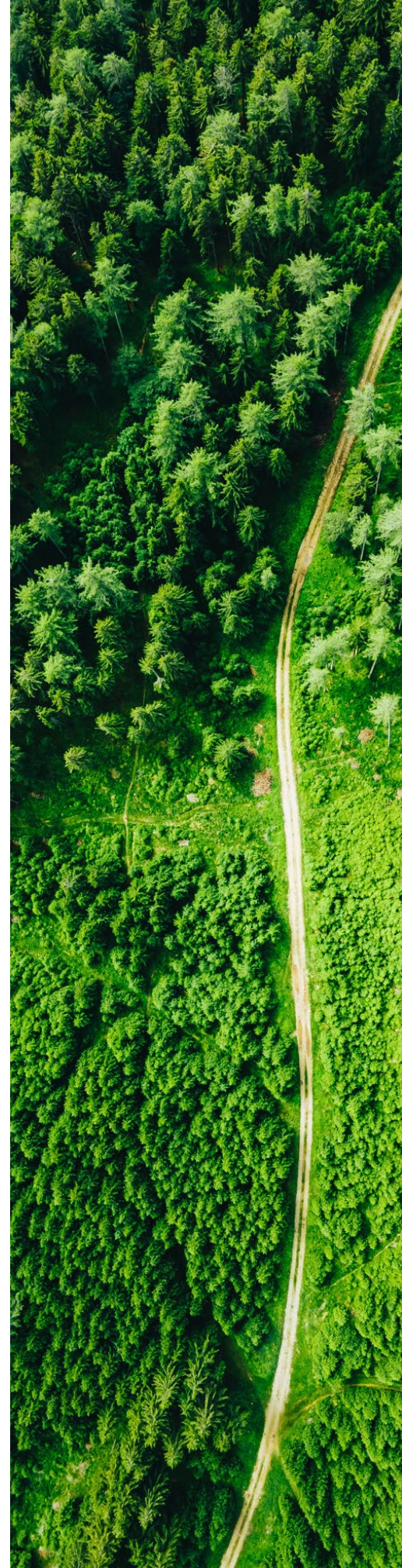


All humanitarian operations – both institutional and operational – are 100% powered by renewable energy.

“ ‘Centuries ago, in Landikotal and Ramzak, they were using wind energy, so why can't we use that again?’⁹²

Energy access from a basic needs and human rights perspective: Lowering emissions and supporting quality of life reform in humanitarian settings

While access to energy has not been defined explicitly as a human right, many have challenged this, arguing it is essential in meeting basic human needs, such as food and health;⁹³ ‘... it is not a luxury, it's a necessity like food and water’.⁹⁴ The global energy system has enabled billions to significantly improve their living standards, and enabled global economies to thrive, while many people living in poverty are deprived of energy services.⁹⁵ Many of the principles outlined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights rely on access to energy (e.g. Article 25: the right to adequate standard of living; Article 26: the right to education; and Article 1: all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights).⁹⁶ In 2019, however, 759 million people were living without access to electricity, while 90% of refugees living in rural areas lack sufficient access to clean energy, hindering their ability to work, study and cook.⁹⁷ In 2022, it is now estimated that 94% of displaced people in camps do not have access to electricity and 81% use only the most basic firewood and charcoal for cooking.⁹⁸ Evidently, the case for equity in renewable energy access is also critical. As the greatest emitter of greenhouse gases, the energy sector contributes substantially to global warming, the effects of which disproportionately harm the livelihoods and security of people who lack access to energy services.⁹⁹ Ensuring renewable energy access for all is paramount in eliminating poverty, ensuring all humans beings have their basic needs met, and to achieve a healthy and sustainable future in a NetZero world.



How does renewable energy fit into a green humanitarian system?

1. Renewable energy is increasingly cost-effective and must become a priority

In a clean energy system, all donors require implementing partners to employ sustainable energy components in all areas of their operations. Clear and coherent field-tested guidelines not only prioritise sustainable energy use in humanitarian practice, but enable it by supporting procurement of appropriate equipment and mechanisms. All stakeholders understand and accept some additional upfront expense, but value the return on investment in the long term. Multi-year funding mechanisms and standardised monitoring, evaluation, accountability and learning frameworks are instrumental backbones in these processes.¹⁰⁰

“ ‘Universal access to clean energy could vastly improve the health and wellbeing of millions of refugees and other forcibly displaced persons. We have a long way to go to ensure clean energy access for all, but going forward with governments, civil society, and the private sector, we can together develop effective solutions for the 21st century.’¹⁰¹

Kelly T. Clements (UNHCR)

2. Humanitarians must forge strong partnerships with renewable energy providers

Reaching the vision for clean energy requires stronger engagement between the humanitarian and energy sectors, which traditionally house different areas of expertise. Initiatives such as the GPA, which runs the UNHCR's Clean Energy Challenge, that seeks to bring together businesses, governments and organisations to provide clean energy for forcibly displaced populations, have been leveraged and scaled.¹⁰² Practice is based on formalised partnerships with clean energy providers, thus allowing for the creation of opportunities for the humanitarian sector to enhance its technical capacity by drawing upon expertise in the energy sector to inform and guide organisational standards, policy, decision-making and awareness. Practitioner training programmes, such as the Energy Delivery Models training produced by WFP and the GPA, can support such local action.¹⁰³

3. Localised partnerships for clean energy

International actors have continued to support local and national actors to embed renewable energy into their operations and support them to build relationships with renewable energy providers. Local coordination efforts, such as the Humanitarian Energy Exchange Network (HEEN), support national and local actors in forums and decision-making processes along with actors at all levels (operational, policymakers and donors) to agree on steps towards reaching an equitable, feasible and sustainable transition towards a 100% renewable energy humanitarian system.¹⁰⁴



How we tackle waste

“ ‘During TC Harold I was part of the team that distributed food rations ... after a week there was a huge flash flood that flushed out empty packets, containers, etc. The waste blocked all the drainage channels and resulted in more flash flooding.’¹⁰⁵

In humanitarian contexts, waste management solutions are often lacking or inadequate, resulting in large quantities of waste accumulating – mostly in affected regions, which can compound disaster impacts.¹⁰⁶ Solid waste, such as relief items, their packaging, medical and e-waste can remain in the environment indefinitely, or be disposed of improperly, leading to environmental damage, carbon dioxide and methane emissions, and toxic pollution that increases health risks for local populations.¹⁰⁷ Funding commitments from the aid sector are far from adequate for resolving this issue, with a mere 0.3% of total funds allocated towards solid waste management.¹⁰⁸

“ ‘In a time when we have developed more sustainable means of waste disposal then we might move away from this temporary solution.’¹⁰⁹



Spotlight: Medical waste

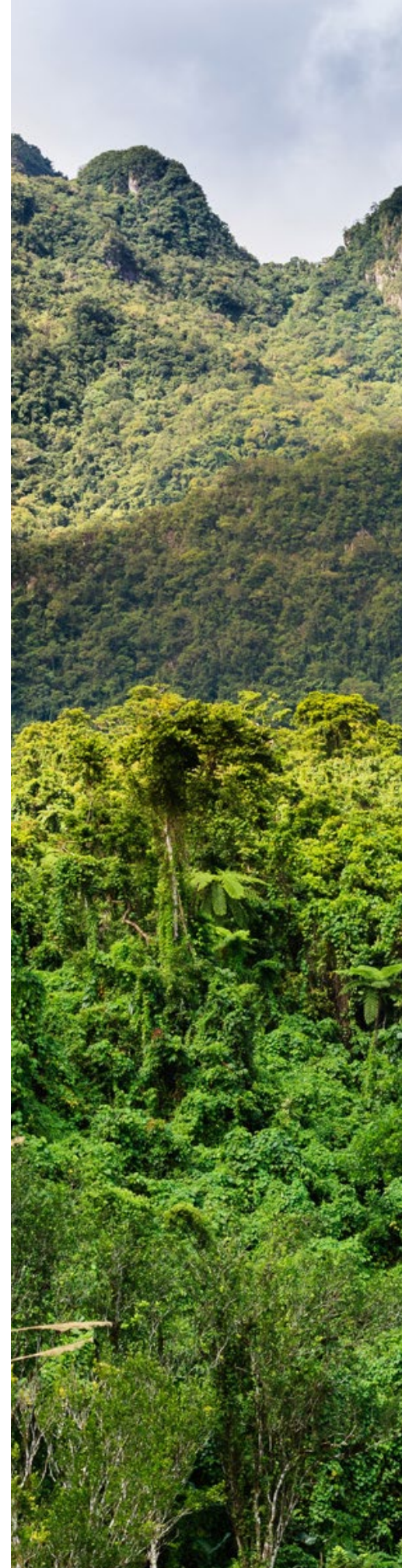
Heavy production and distribution of medical equipment due to the COVID-19 pandemic, have resulted in a high influx of medical waste, further compounding the global waste crisis. Thirty per cent of healthcare facilities (60% in less developed countries) are not equipped to manage their waste loads; alarmingly, this figure does not account for the additional waste loads from the COVID-19 response.¹¹⁰

“ ‘Medical waste and disposal is a huge issue. I have escalated in my organisation the need for better practices and disposal of clinical/ non-clinical/sharps/general waste. I’ve seen it all burnt, causing toxic fumes, or left to be a danger.’¹¹¹

OUR VISION FOR WASTE MANAGEMENT:



Humanitarian operations systematically employ circular economy approaches to manage waste, and work with governments and civil society actors to enhance waste management systems globally.



What would waste management in a green humanitarian system look like?

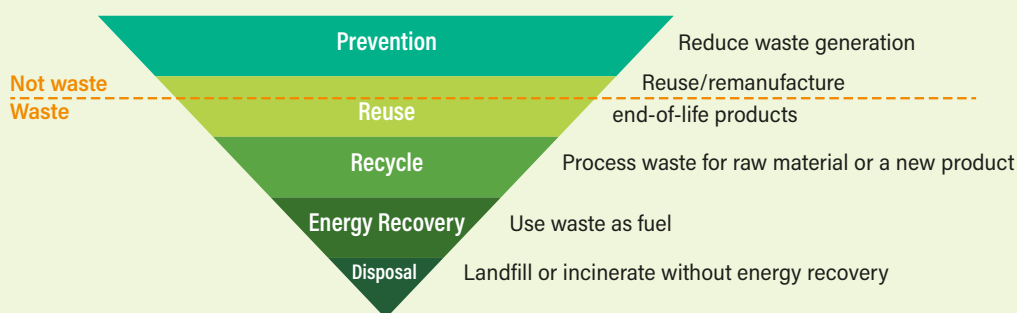
A green humanitarian system is underpinned by a circular economy approach to waste management. A circular economy both eliminates waste and boosts economic activity through the circular lifecycle of natural resources; globally, it is estimated that it could produce up to \$4.5 trillion in economic benefits by 2030.¹¹² Circular economy approaches in humanitarian action contribute to eliminating environmental harm from non-sustainable waste, improving the health of local populations through environmental protective measures, and powering economic progress.¹¹³

Circular economy -

“ ‘a framework for an economy that decouples economic activity from the consumption of finite resources, by designing waste out of the system’. ¹¹⁴ Ellen Macarthur Foundation

A circular economy is underpinned by the following principles: 1) design out waste and pollution; 2) keep materials in use; 3) regenerate natural systems. It promotes the use of sustainable and natural materials as an alternative to waste, and aims to stimulate economic activity and contribute positive environmental outcomes through a continuous cycle of activity.¹¹⁵

Figure 8: Circular Economy Framework



(Adapted from OECD (2020) Circular economy, waste, and materials, p. 2)

The humanitarian sector can realise a circular economy through a focus on two objectives:

1. Collective transition as a sector towards sustainable resources in supplies and materials

In a green system, humanitarian actors will have transformed the way that resources and supplies are used, from source. A significant reduction in the use of packaging waste will relieve the pressure on waste management systems in affected countries. It will be achieved through sector-wide commitments to standardise the use and procurement of sustainable materials in humanitarian action, coordinating with suppliers to enable collective efforts in cleaning supply chains, and reducing dependency on metals and single-use plastics in favour of materials that are 100% recyclable and sustainable.

2. Local actors and governments (particularly in low-income countries) are supported to upscale their waste management capacities

Coordinated efforts across the sector between humanitarian organisations, agencies and donors will support host governments and local actors to upscale in-country waste management capacities. We will collectively broker technical expertise, awareness-raising and capacity-building initiatives. Expertise in circular approaches will be used to reorient our practices, and the documented financial benefits of a circular economy model will contribute to the growth of local and national economies.¹¹⁶ The resources for powering circular economy implementation will be met by adequate funding commitments.¹¹⁷



How we use water

The global crisis of adequate access to safe water and sanitation is well documented.¹¹⁸ The human right to water is an implicit component of the human right to an adequate standard of living, guaranteed by the legally binding International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.¹¹⁹ Moreover, UN General Assembly Resolution 64/292 acknowledges 'equitable access to safe and clean drinking water and sanitation' as an integral component of the realisation of all human rights.¹²⁰

However, while meeting acute water needs (for survival) is imperative, this represents a minimum target and is a far cry from the UN Human Rights Council's specified 'right to the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health, as well as the right to life and human dignity'.¹²¹ A sole focus on physiological water needs overlooks other critical water needs related to social identity and wellbeing, and the environment on which these depend.

Water supply and demand patterns are often popularly associated with carelessness, greed, and/or inappropriate governance and licencing. However, while this may be true in many instances, it is important to note from a behavioural perspective that common water management problems often stem from a lack of material and social proximity between the point of use and the point of impact. Issues such as over-extraction, unsustainable resource capture and distribution, or contamination of ground and surface waters, often result from poorly understood or communicated interconnectivity between water resource stakeholders.

Indeed, the flowing nature of water means that applying the Do No Harm principle of environmental protection is not limited to the immediate location of humanitarian response. Rather, water interactions must take into account communities up and downstream that depend on the same water source.

Similarly, humanitarian interventions can have long-term impacts on water resources, and therefore must also consider water needs over time.



Spotlight: groundwater depletion and the need for long-term analysis

“ ‘If we go for quick and cheap response to any humanitarian crisis, the environment suffers and it can create irreversible damage. Even if we want to respond quickly, we have to make some strategies to combat or minimise the negative impact of intervention on environment. ... Many organisations put up solar wells in many areas without anticipating and keeping the consequences in mind. They would hail this as a drought-countering move. In fact, they are creating drought. In the last two to five years, the overall water level has been depleted fifteen to twenty feet, which is alarming. INGOs are justifying their funding and organisations are still solarising the wells.’¹²²

OUR VISION FOR HOW WE USE WATER:



Humanitarian action strives for water outcomes that promote human dignity, recognising its physiological, psychological, cultural, spiritual and environmental importance for personal and social wellbeing, and the interdependence of such needs over time.



What does an approach to water issues look like in a green humanitarian system?

A green humanitarian system aspires to a world free of suffering from water insufficiency, and so engages with water issues with the aim of promoting human dignity and wellbeing.

1. Humanitarian responders consider their impact on watercourses in a wide and integrated hydrological context, as well as over time.

The Do No Harm principle – specifically as it relates to water extraction – considers up and downstream communities who share the water source but may not be visible at the site of humanitarian action.¹²³ This means that, in addition to considering water needs for drinking, washing and cooking, the humanitarian sector approaches water with regard to its impacts on community wellbeing and social cohesion.

2. Water use is carbon neutral.

In a green humanitarian system, the extraction, treatment and distribution of water is carbon neutral or net negative. This means the projected impacts of climate change are taken into account in the design of water infrastructure.

3. Interconnectivity of water systems, services, and objectives

Access to water is approached from both the supply and demand sides. The interconnectedness of social services and systems as they relate to water are considered,¹²⁴ and water justice is acknowledged as a necessary component of sustainable water systems.

Section 3: The how – how do we get there?

“ ‘It’s easy to say “let’s go green”, but hard to implement.’¹²⁵

In working towards the shared vision articulated in this paper, we identified key barriers that are preventing the change needed across the sector, as well as some critical enablers. To achieve a greener humanitarian future, progress towards overcoming the barriers and leveraging the enablers is vital. This section explores what this means for the future.

BARRIERS

A perceived trade-off

“ ‘In operations people think it’s not a priority. What they don’t understand is that ... saving lives means sustainability.’¹²⁶

The humanitarian sector by nature is focused on saving lives and protecting the livelihoods of those suffering in the present as quickly as possible.¹²⁷ The most widely cited barrier to a more consistent approach to greening humanitarian action was lack of time to focus on environmental issues, particularly during rapid-onset crises.¹²⁸ Additionally, several interviewees expressed concerns over the feasibility of incorporating environmental initiatives into humanitarian action, raising the issue that many within the sector believe additional environmental objectives would compromise the effectiveness of immediate humanitarian action.¹²⁹ Competing priorities faced by humanitarian actors leads to environmental integrity becoming a secondary priority over immediate efforts to save lives.

For example, one interviewee mentioned the lack of environmental consideration in the response to the 2010 floods in Pakistan, citing the emergency scenario and lack of time to consider other factors outside the response itself.¹³⁰

“ ‘During the flood emergency of 2010, there was [a] limited amount of time to generate the response, and most of the organisations had to put the environmental considerations and protocols on [the] backburner.’¹³¹

This focus on immediacy and the present can be detrimental to the climate and the environment, which can be seen as a future issue rather than a present issue.¹³² Unless this perception is shifted across the system, actors will continue to de-prioritise environmental protection as a secondary priority, rather than an immediate and critical need to be met collectively. Shifting perceptions around greening priorities and their systematic integration into policies and planning should not be placed in the ‘too hard basket’.

“ ‘The biggest challenge when it comes to greening the system is that it requires a lot of advanced preparation. When it comes to the crunch and the need to provide something, you provide what you’ve got. Most times, you’re not ready because you’re too focused on saving lives or alleviating immediate suffering. You just have to use whatever is instantly available or readily available. If the solution is green, then that would be prioritised.’¹³³

Existing defaults

Positive environmental choices in humanitarian action are not currently promoted by defaults across the system; they require effort and intention to overcome existing structures and processes. For example, the siloed nature of the humanitarian sector leads to the perception that some organisations 'do' environmental programs and others focus on different areas, making system-wide shifts in behaviours challenging.¹³⁴ Unless the defaults change, existing practices will not shift at the scale and speed that is required. The defaults need to shift to make more sustainable choices easier rather than more difficult.¹³⁵

Competing priorities and the ability to 'opt out'

Currently, environmentally responsible humanitarian action is seen as an 'add-on' – an additional priority, something to add to an ever-increasing list of priorities to improve humanitarian outcomes. Many stakeholders reported that one of the most consistent barriers to progress was in the plethora of competing priorities, particularly for field staff.¹³⁶

“ ‘On the action side, this is where we face institutional barriers, people in the field are overworked, underpaid, overwhelmed and if you come to them with another priority they see this as just another burden, like all the other “new” secondary priorities.’¹³⁷

With a lack of defaults in place that force the change, it is possible to make choices that maintain the status quo. The narrative that focuses on the lack of time to 'save lives' in emergency response can add legitimacy to these choices – even if the resulting aid is not appropriate because affected people have not been consulted, or if communities are left to deal with the negative impacts that flow from these choices. Even when there is individual will, multiple priorities coupled with too few resources and short time scales prevent change.¹³⁸

“ ‘People are willing, but they're not able to do it and they are overwhelmed – so we need to make it simple, donors need to simplify things and make it feasible.’¹³⁹

The problem isn't yet visible enough

“ ‘Most of the organisations don't take this seriously because of [a] lack of awareness. As they have no awareness on the matter, it keeps them unmotivated on the subject.’¹⁴⁰

Despite the well-documented environmental impacts of humanitarian action, the prevailing problems are not yet visible enough to force decision-makers and implementers to change practices.¹⁴¹ Without the ability to vividly see the negative imagery associated with *not* making greener choices in their actions, individuals are less likely to shift their practices.¹⁴²

“ ‘I think not even ten per cent of people fully know about it. The other ninety per cent have to know a bit, but certainly lack sensitisation around the cause.’¹⁴³

This is a critical barrier when it comes not only to individual choices but to decision-makers.¹⁴⁴ At leadership level, lack of visibility of the negative impacts of unsustainable action prevents shifts at other levels within organisations and across the entire system.

It's not yet the norm

“ ‘I can say that ninety-eight per cent of organisations, whether UN agencies, INGOs or NGOs in the humanitarian sector, haven't started this; only two per cent of organisations are well advanced.’¹⁴⁵

Despite the momentum that is building and increasing examples of good practice (see Section 1), environmentally sustainable behaviours are not currently considered to be standard practice.¹⁴⁶ Many

participants stated that even if individuals know that a shift to more environmentally sustainable practices is required, they are not aware of it actually happening. For example, one stakeholder spoke about multiple field missions that chose to use unsustainable practices (such as use of harmful chemicals, heavy use of fossil fuels and unnecessary use of plastic water bottles), yet no conversations were had about the impacts of those decisions or alternatives.¹⁴⁷

“ ‘I haven’t seen any intentional efforts to ensure a greener response.’¹⁴⁸

There is also a visible difference between the existence of policies and perceptions of progress at headquarters and in the field.¹⁴⁹ Many good practices are happening at the operational level, but a gap between policymakers and responders exists. For example, global-level stakeholders felt there was significant progress being made, whilst actors in Pakistan felt that whilst it was a priority, there was little action.

“ ‘As far as greening the humanitarian system is concerned, it is likely that most of us don’t have much broader ideas about this concept because it has been introduced recently.’¹⁵⁰

National Actor, Pakistan

Individual behaviours are motivated by seeing others make particular choices. The more that sustainable practices of humanitarian action are seen as the norm, the more likely others are to follow suit.¹⁵¹

Power dynamics and the exclusion of local voices


Indigenous and local communities are the first to be affected, yet last to be heard. Colonial power dynamics remain embedded within the humanitarian system, marginalising indigenous and local knowledge in decision and policy-making processes.¹⁵² This is reflected in the broader climate change discourse; the under-representation of indigenous voices at global climate conferences and elsewhere have contributed to Global North-led approaches to climate action that often fail to address the territorial and cultural rights of indigenous peoples.¹⁵³

“ ‘Over the years, our communities have responded to a humanitarian crisis through traditional means. These practices are greener than how humanitarian respondents are currently responding. They work with less to no technology, equipment, chemicals and even packaging.’¹²⁷ National actor, Fiji

Disregarding the values of traditional knowledge frequently results in environmental degradation, the weakening of resilience, and additional post-crisis risks and vulnerabilities to communities – as demonstrated in major humanitarian operations in Tonga, Bangladesh (see Figure 2) and Haiti.¹⁵⁴ Sustainable adaptation and mitigation practices are often already built into the systems of local and indigenous approaches to enhancing resilience, presenting significant opportunities to advance a greener humanitarian model through increased efforts to elevate local leadership.¹⁵⁵

If you imagine what a Green Humanitarian System looks like, what elements do you see?

40.7% of respondents saw ‘Localisation and Leveraging Traditional Knowledge’ as the most important element.¹⁵⁶



Financing for sustainability – perceptions and realities of financial barriers and incentives

Funding for greening operations has consistently been identified as a priority. Different perceptions emerged on the financial implications of moving towards more environmentally friendly approaches within the sector.¹⁵⁷ For example, procuring relief items made from more environmentally sustainable materials will occur at extra cost. Investing in solar energy for a refugee camp is likely to also require additional upfront costs.


However, some actors also commented that not all shifts require additional resources. Some choices, such as choosing to use canoes to transport relief items in the Pacific, were more viable than via boat or plane, and using woven coconut baskets rather than plastic containers for distribution created cost savings.¹⁵⁸

“ ‘A lot of things can happen by making savings. There’s a lot of opportunities to save money also.’¹⁵⁹

When there are additional upfront costs, there are opportunities to consider the longer-term impacts of sustainable alternatives, including some that create financial gains over time.¹⁶⁰ For example, the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA) has financed the UNHCR’s Green Fund – an innovative financing mechanism designed to transition offices and compounds to solar energy for a positive carbon and financial impact, because solar is already cheaper than fossil fuels in many countries.¹⁶¹

“ ‘It may be costly at the beginning, but you learn from your mistakes and in the long run it’s not costly.’¹⁶²

Many actors perceive that money will need to be reprioritised from life-saving activities to support environmental protection initiatives, leading to de-prioritisation (see Section 3 – Barriers above).¹⁶³ There is also a perception that existing value-for-money analysis metrics do not account for environmental costs, making more expensive – but more sustainable – proposals unpalatable for donors.¹⁶⁴ A 2019 IFRC report, however, highlights the financial implications of climate inaction, estimating that climate-related humanitarian costs could increase to USD 20 billion per year by 2030, with the number of people in need of humanitarian assistance as a result of climate-related disasters could nearly double to 200 million.¹⁶⁵



“ ‘If we pollute the air, water and soil that keep us alive and well, and destroy the biodiversity that allows natural systems to function, no amount of money will save us.’¹⁶⁶ David Suzuki

Moreover, global projections suggest severe economic consequences as a result of rising temperatures, with Southeast Asian, Middle Eastern and African countries to be hit hardest, limiting financial capacity to meet increasing needs.¹⁶⁷

“ ‘Donors must incentivise and give some extra leverage to those organisations who are compliant to climate adaptation.’¹⁶⁸

Some funders are trialling new approaches to support enhanced quality of the response through improved environmental sustainability. For example, DG ECHO is trialling accepting up to 10% more expensive projects as long as their environmental benefits can be justified (such as ones incorporating waste management solutions or distribution of clean energy). DG ECHO is also more explicitly open to accepting higher upfront costs for greener measures that can lead to savings over time in more protracted contexts. There is a push, however, to ensure that partners can prove a return on investment over time, despite funding cycles still being limited to one year.¹⁶⁹ Longer-term perspectives for humanitarian financing can also support Grand Bargain commitments to allocate longer-term and more flexible financing (see *Complementary agendas* below).

“ ‘It’s expensive if it’s not the correct resources that we implement correctly.’¹⁷⁰

Greening of organisations and systems also present financial benefits. Businesses across the private sector have recognised the imperative of sustainability and de-carbonisation commitments for their market share and competitive edge amongst consumers. Across the Asia-Pacific region, almost 500 businesses are part of the Race to Zero campaign. The global membership totals over 8,000 organisations committed to NetZero by 2050 at the latest, making up nearly 25% of the world’s emissions.¹⁷¹

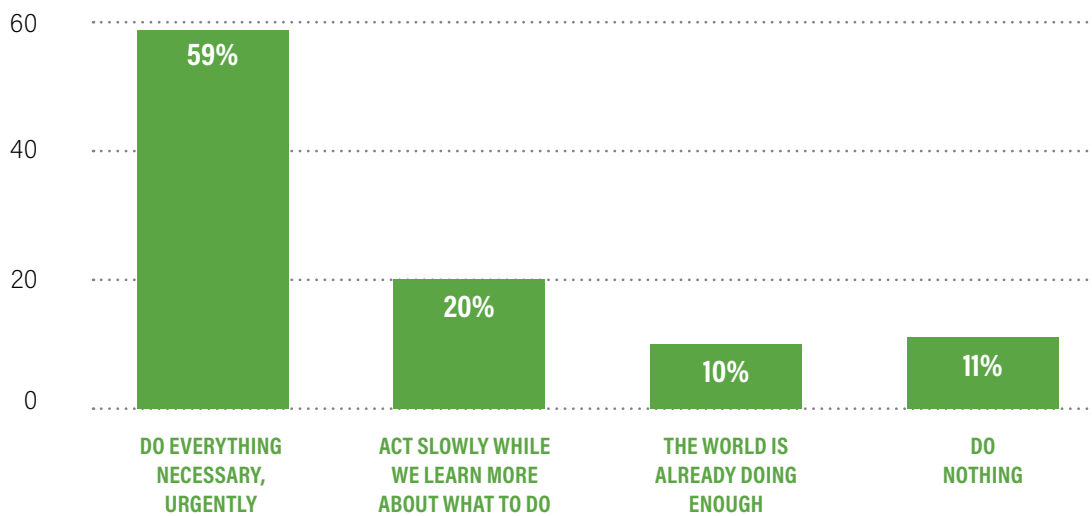
“ ‘Consumer attitudes are driving a shift in purchasing behaviour, with an increasing expectation that business will have a clear and committed stance when it comes to reaching NetZero. Businesses that ignore this shift will risk alienating a substantial and growing proportion of their customer base.’¹⁷²

ENABLERS

Climate change and environmental issues are becoming more salient

Despite the lack of visibility across the sector of the specifics of how humanitarian action harms the climate and environment, the importance of the issue and appetite for change have become much more salient. In 2021, for example, 75% of Australians were concerned about climate change, compared with 66% in 2017.¹⁷³ Moreover, the largest public opinion survey on climate change to date found that 64% of 1.2 million people surveyed perceive climate change as a global emergency, the majority of whom believe the world should do everything necessary and urgently to respond to the issue.¹⁷⁴

Figure 9: Urgency of response among people who believe in the climate emergency



(Adapted from UNDP and University of Oxford (2021) People's climate vote, p. 17)

This public support, though not consistent worldwide, is evidence of the global context in which the humanitarian sector operates. Public opinion is also driving the private sector and governments to shift practices and approaches. This momentum is an enabler that can be leveraged to increase the speed and scale of change in the humanitarian sector.

Whilst there is a legacy of large private sector organisations actively engaging in disinformation campaigns around climate change, many private sector organisations are becoming partners for sustainable development or active transformers, due to the realisation that this is not only essential for the future of their businesses, but the planet.¹⁷⁵



Spotlight: Transforming the private sector: B Corporation

The Benefit Corporation (B Corp) movement is a network of over 4,900 certified companies representing 153 industries working towards 'a world where business is a force for good, and plays a leading role in positively impacting and transforming the global economy into a more inclusive, equitable, and regenerative system'. B Corp certification requires organisations to adhere to specific social and environmental standards.¹⁷⁶

We have the evidence

There is an increasing evidence base for the impacts of humanitarian action on the environment; however, this research found perceptions of awareness of this evidence across the sector are mixed. Some participants felt that it was widely understood, whereas others thought that it wasn't common knowledge.¹⁷⁷

“ ‘If the impacts that that we are witnessing in our environment are not convincing anyone, then we are doomed. I believe that everyone is aware but the majority are not doing anything about it.’¹⁷⁸

Table 1 below provides an overview of some of the major research initiatives that have contributed to the evidence about the environmental impacts of humanitarian action.

Table 1

PUBLICATION	ORGANISATION
Climate change & humanitarian action	ADAPT
Adapting humanitarian action to the effects of climate change	ALNAP
DG ECHO's approach to reducing the environmental footprint of humanitarian aid	DG ECHO
Coordination of assessments for environment in humanitarian action	EHA Connect
Topic guide: mainstreaming environment and climate change into humanitarian action	Evidence on Demand
The State of the Humanitarian Energy Sector 2022	GPA, UNHCR, IOM, SEforALL et al
Environmental footprint of humanitarian assistance-scoping review	Groupe URD
Environment and humanitarian action: increasing effectiveness, sustainability and accountability	Groupe URD, OCHA & UNEP
World disasters report 2020	IFRC
The cost of doing nothing: the humanitarian price of climate change and how it can be avoided	IFRC
Strategic framework for climate action	UNHCR
Addressing the humanitarian challenges of climate change: regional and national perspectives	WFP, IFRC & OCHA

We must collectively maximise awareness of this evidence base. Through clearly, consistently and visibly socialising the evidence of negative impacts of humanitarian action, we can stimulate further shifts in choices towards more environmentally sustainable practices.

Motivation and momentum

As outlined in Section 1, examples of progress towards green humanitarian action are accumulating, particularly over the last few years. Broad visibility and awareness of this progress can help to create a more dynamic social norm. In addition, visibility of the drivers that led to this progress can help others to understand the steps required to implement similar changes.

This research also consistently highlighted that where there was awareness of the impetus to change, there was motivation. Motivation is a critical enabler; harnessing individual drive and bridging the 'intention to action gap'¹⁷⁹ can shift individuals across the system to make choices in favour of the climate and environment.

Poll 1: How important is it to green the humanitarian system?

87% of respondents believed that it was extremely important.¹⁸⁰

Complementary agendas

This research has uncovered a series of global agendas that can complement the shift towards a greener humanitarian system. For example:



LOCALISATION: Increasing local action can reduce emissions at the same time as empowering local leadership. Similarly, global commitments outlined in the Climate and Environmental Charter for Humanitarian Organisations promotes 'Embracing Leadership of Local Actors and Communities' as commitment number 3.



THE CASH AGENDA: A shift towards more cash programming over relief supplies (where appropriate) can reduce emissions from transporting relief items and material waste from unsustainable relief supplies. However, the modality of the cash delivery mechanism is a critical influencing factor – cash programming is still not considered environmentally neutral. For example, Cash For Work can reduce environmental impacts (such as removing debris or waste), but has also been found to contribute to harm (e.g. cash transfers for shelter materials were linked to a rise in illegal logging after the Boxing Day tsunami in Aceh, Indonesia in 2004).¹⁸¹



QUALITY FUNDING: As outlined in Financing for Sustainability above, funding allocations prohibit the implementation of some environmental approaches in humanitarian operations. The Grand Bargain Quality Funding Caucus articulates a specific agenda around increasing multi-year flexible funding.¹⁸² This agenda can be leveraged in discussions around shifting funding practices for sustainable operations.



ACCOUNTABILITY TO AFFECTED POPULATIONS (AAP): Mainstreaming environmental integrity into humanitarian action strengthens our commitment to AAP.¹⁸³ As outlined throughout the paper, environmental resilience is central to the livelihoods, health and economic security of individuals and populations. Ensuring humanitarian actors commit to responsible and transparent uses of power to effectively mitigate and reverse environmental harm by meaningfully including communities and individuals in decision-making processes is core to addressing the needs and rights of those we seek to assist.



INCLUSION: Strengthened understandings of the disproportionate effects of climate change upon different social groups can enhance efforts to implement a more inclusive response. For example, women account for 80% of people displaced by climate change, while women and children are estimated to be 14 times more likely to die as a result of natural disasters, and people with a disability face heightened risks and vulnerabilities.¹⁸⁴ Recognising the disproportionate risks that vulnerable and marginalised groups face as a result of climate change enables actors to mainstream an inclusive humanitarian approach and meet the distinctive needs of affected populations more effectively.

We must harmonise shared objectives to enable a system that, whilst continuing to meet the needs of crisis-affected populations at its core, can conceptualise that these needs are also contingent on a healthy environment and planet.

Section 4: What next? Steps towards reaching the vision

This paper has outlined what a green humanitarian system could look like in the future. The proposed vision is not static; we will continue to build upon this vision to strengthen the evidence about what shifts need to happen across the sector to achieve a shared end state, and encourage stakeholders to take the actions needed to generate change at the scale and speed required.

We know that these issues are daunting, and that for individuals – even for whole organisations – the scale of change required can make it hard to know where to begin. We realise that even the vision we have proposed, which aims to provide concrete goals, priority actions, and enabling strategies, may feel very ambitious and wide-ranging. But ambition should not be a dirty word; it is exactly what we need. We must be ambitious to prevent the worst-case environmental scenarios, and to create a future that is better than the current limits of our imagination. That is the future that people affected by crises deserve.

Questions that still require answers include:

- What are the best leverage points for generating behavioural change at all levels across the humanitarian system?
- Are many small-scale changes required, or a systemic overhaul, or both?
- How can we overcome entrenched behavioural barriers?
- How can we, as humanitarians, work beyond our sector to influence and coordinate with other actors to reach a NetZero future for our planet?
- What evidence does the *Greening the System* research stream need to generate to shift behaviours across the sector and maximise the chance of achieving our shared vision? (And finally)
- How can we measure progress?

August	September/October	October 2022 - November 2023	December 2023 - October 2024
Multi-stakeholder methodology workshop	Finalising methodology for phases 2 and 3	Phase 2	Phase 3

We invite you to join us in developing the methodology for the future of the research stream. Contact the research team with any questions or to join us on this exciting research journey!



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Greening the System: A vision for a green humanitarian future



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