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THE TIME IS NOW

Humanitarians in the Age of Climate Crisis

Insights from Consultations

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Insights from Consultations

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E EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The humanitarian community must respond to the climate emergency: The humanitarian community must urgently reorient its entire model to minimize the all-encompassing threats of climate change. As extreme weather disasters escalate worldwide, vulnerable communities face a collapse of coping capacity and loss of hard-won development gains. Globally, needs are poised to overwhelm resources. Locally, aid often distorts response and fosters dependence.

The hour is late, but the opportunity remains to shape the future with visionary leadership rather than abandon our responsibilities. This starts with a frank acknowledgment that the scale of the crisis overshadows current capacities, which are optimized for isolated emergencies. No actor alone can address systemic climate and environmental risks spanning public health, human habitats, food security, displacement, conflict, and development. Thus, coordination and efficiency must improve dramatically even as the humanitarian sector stretches finances further.

Simultaneously, the humanitarian community must increase local resilience to climate change. Local stakeholders, as first responders, often demonstrate greater effectiveness, cost-efficiency, and community connections when supported to lead. Transitioning authority and resources to local civil society offers sustainability that temporary international responses never can. Climate justice demands investment in national systems and crisis-vulnerable groups to own their response.

Preparedness is equally important. Predictive analytics offers increasing confidence to prevent or reduce the impacts of disasters before they fully manifest. Investing a fraction earlier than ad-hoc humanitarian relief can multiply protection for the vulnerable. Anticipatory action and forecast-based finance should become default wherever data allows.

Finally, our community must mitigate its environmental impacts in the field. Local knowledge can inform more sustainable, culturally appropriate aid systems that reuse and reduce need and emissions. Community-owned transitions to clean energy and environmental restoration promote resilience far more than imported solar gadgets.

In short, an unprecedented threat compels unprecedented collective leadership. The road ahead is challenging but there are opportunities to collectively refine current structures to be fit for purpose. Given the urgency, the humanitarian community must relook at sectoral silos and coordination structures, engage local stakeholders, and set cohesive priorities. Donors must harmonize environmental priorities and reporting requirements. The accountability of development and private sector stakeholders, including governments, must be advocated, as humanitarian efforts alone cannot address underlying causes of poverty, inequality, and environmental vulnerabilities.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

The humanitarian sector must promptly take action to respond to environmental degradation and climate-induced crises while tackling their compounding impacts on vulnerable populations. This involves increasing awareness of climate-related risks, enhancing operational efficiency and coherent policy positions, and working towards and expediting the transition to locally led initiatives.

Acknowledge the urgency and lack of coherence

Recognize the critical nature and impacts of climate change and its far-reaching consequences, which erode community capacity to cope. Given the sector's existing strains, concerted efforts are required at all levels to enhance effectiveness and efficiency. This necessitates improved coordination and collaboration and an increased understanding of the intricate relationship between climate drivers and other risk factors. Currently, environmental programs are mainstreamed, often voluntary, and there is a system-wide lack of urgency and coherent policy priorities.

Foster locally led responses

Foster local leadership and empower communities as primary responders during crises, leveraging their inherent advantages, including their understanding of the local context and environment. Progress toward localization is crucial, strengthening local capacities for response and recovery to bolster overall community resilience.

Strengthen organizational readiness

Humanitarian organizations must bolster their internal climate and environmental capacities to address escalating climate-related challenges. Establishing dedicated training pathways, fostering staff expertise in emerging risk analysis, adaptation programming, environmental law, clean energy transitions, and ecosystem-based approaches. Retaining multi-disciplinary technical talent well-versed in climate science and sustainability principles is essential for enhanced responsiveness. Strategic investments in embedding specialized climate and environment skills through initiatives like "Green Teams" ensure ongoing relevance amid the growing demands of climate-driven humanitarian needs.

Develop a multisectoral environmental management mechanism

Recognize the positive outcomes demonstrated by some existing multisectoral approaches. There is a compelling opportunity to adopt and improve the integration of these systems into the humanitarian response principles and strategy from assessment to implementation. This proactive approach ensures a comprehensive and coordinated strategy to address climate-related risks and environmental challenges, fostering a more effective and resilient humanitarian response.

Scale up early response, adaptation, anticipatory action, and early recovery

Prioritize forecasting and proactive measures to strengthen early response and recovery efforts before hazards materialize. Anticipatory action safeguards people, livestock, and assets, improving adaptability to future risks linked to climate change. The humanitarian sector should integrate anticipatory action into its programs, making it the default response for predictable climate-related crises. Additionally, it is imperative that humanitarian organizations complement anticipatory action, early response, and early recovery initiatives with individual protection assistance. This holistic approach ensures the mitigation of environmental and climate-related risks and the safeguarding of individuals, fostering a comprehensive and people-centered response.

Adopt risk-sensitive programming

Ensure the humanitarian program cycle (HPC) incorporates a risk-sensitive approach, recognizing its inherent benefits for affected populations and the broader humanitarian community. While complete prevention of humanitarian crises may be challenging, embracing a risk-informed programming model significantly reduces the severity of suffering caused by various shocks, crises, and disasters. This involves actively integrating risk sensitivity into all stages of the HPC, fostering collaboration, and proactively addressing potential threats. Context-based strategic priorities must be set to guide implementing partners.

Green the humanitarian response

Leverage the knowledge and expertise of local humanitarian organizations, governments, and communities regarding their environment and the impact of humanitarian actions. Utilize their insights into waste management, recycling potential, and local practices to devise effective, environmentally friendly solutions that enhance disaster resilience. Encourage innovative, locally led initiatives tailored to specific contexts for more sustainable humanitarian responses.



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Optimize and mobilize financial resources

Recognizing the limitations of the international humanitarian community and acknowledging the financial challenges posed by the crisis, the humanitarian sector must maximize fund efficiency, foster collaboration across organizations, and transition to a default approach of being locally led. This involves making resources work harder, stretching further, and strategically collaborating to meet the evolving demands of the humanitarian landscape.

GLOSSARY

As climate change and concepts associated with it become better understood, researchers and policy makers continue to define new terms and refine older ones. Consequently, InterAction recommends that readers use the latest definitions provided by the IPCC. At the time of publishing this report, those definitions can be found at https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg2/downloads/report/IPCC_AR6_WGII_Annex-II.pdf

Adaptive capacity: Combination of strengths, attributes, and resources to prepare for and undertake actions to reduce adverse impacts. (IPCC)
Ability of systems, institutions, humans, and organisms to adjust to potential damage or respond to consequences. (USAID/BHA)

Anticipatory action: Acting ahead of predicted hazards to prevent or reduce acute humanitarian impacts.

Carbon footprint: Total greenhouse gas emissions associated with a particular policy or program

Climate action: Urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts, including steps to strengthen resilience and adaptive capacity.

Climate adaptation: Process of adjustment to actual or expected climate change and its effects in human and natural systems. (IPCC)

Activities or measures to build capacity and resilience to climate change impacts. (SIDA)

Climate change: Change in the state of the climate identified by changes in mean and/or variability, persisting for decades or longer. (IPCC)

Climate crisis: The enhanced vulnerability of people due to the increasing severity of the effects of climate change.

Climate disasters: Serious disruption of a community or society due to hazardous events and related conditions.

Climate-induced loss and damage: Consequences of climate change beyond adaptive capacity, leading to loss and damage. (IPCC)

Climate migration: Movement of people due to sudden or progressive environmental changes caused by climate change.

- Climate mitigation:** Human intervention to reduce emissions or enhance greenhouse gas sinks. (USAID/BHA)
Interventions to reduce greenhouse gas emissions or capture and store them. (SIDA)
- Climate finance:** Local, national, or transnational financing to support mitigation and adaptation actions addressing climate change.
- Climate risks:** Adverse consequences of climate variability and change, affecting lives, livelihoods, health, ecosystems, and more.
- Climate variability:** Shorter-term fluctuations in weather patterns over months, seasons, or years. Variability exacerbating humanitarian crises can be seen in recurrent flooding threatening refugee camps or year-to-year changes shrinking harvests and deepening food insecurity.
- Disaster risk reduction:** Efforts to reduce damage caused by natural hazards through systematic analysis and prevention. (SIDA)
- Early warning systems:** Capacities needed to generate and disseminate timely warning information. (IPCC)
Integrated system for monitoring, forecasting, and preparedness to reduce disaster risks. (IOM)
- Environmental degradation:** The deterioration of the natural environment from both human and natural forces. For instance, deforestation and soil erosion in disaster-prone regions can increase risks for local communities when floods or landslides occur.
- Extreme weather event:** Rare event with characteristics beyond normal variability, such as floods or heatwaves. (IPCC)
- Green response:** Approach to improve environmental outcomes of humanitarian assistance, minimizing harm and carbon emissions. (IFRC)
- Maladaptation:** Actions that increase vulnerability or limit future choices in responding to climate change risks. (IPCC)
- Mitigation (of climate change):** Human efforts to reduce or prevent greenhouse gas emissions and enhance carbon sinks.
- Nature-based solutions:** Actions to protect, manage, and restore natural ecosystems for societal benefits. (IPCC)
Interventions using nature to address environmental challenges, promoting sustainability. (SIDA)
- Preparedness:** Encompasses a proactive set of measures and plans designed to enhance the capacity of individuals, communities, and organizations to effectively address the impacts of disasters and emergencies.



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Resilience: Capacity to mitigate, adapt, and recover from shocks, reducing chronic vulnerability. (USAID/BHA)

Capacity to deal with change, withstand shocks, and rebuild after damage. (SIDA)

Slow-onset climate disasters: Gradual disasters emerging over time, associated with factors like drought or sea-level rise. (UNGA)

Sudden-onset climate disasters: Disasters triggered quickly by hazardous events, such as earthquakes or floods. (UNGA)

Sustainability: The reconciliation of environmental, social, and economic demands, ensuring development meets present needs without compromising the ability of future generations.

Vulnerability: Propensity or predisposition to be adversely affected. (IPCC)

CHAPTER 1. THE UNDERSTANDING OF THE CHALLENGE

Extensive consultations across the humanitarian sector have painted a stark and unambiguous picture: Escalating climate change and environmental degradation represent an unparalleled threat to humanity.

Note: The number of climate- and weather-related disasters has increased since the 1960s and has risen almost 35% since the 1990s.

In the past 10 years, 83% of all disasters triggered by natural hazards were caused by extreme weather- and climate-related events, such as floods, storms, and heatwaves.¹ The proportion of all disasters attributable to climate and extreme weather events has increased significantly during this time, from 76% of all disasters during the 2000s to 83% in the 2010s. These extreme weather- and climate-related disasters have killed more than 410,000 people in the past 10 years, the vast majority in low and lower-middle-income countries. Heat waves, then storms, have been the biggest killers. Climate- and weather-related disasters have affected a further 1.7 billion people worldwide during the past decade.

The challenge is clear: Climate change is making it tougher to deliver humanitarian aid effectively.

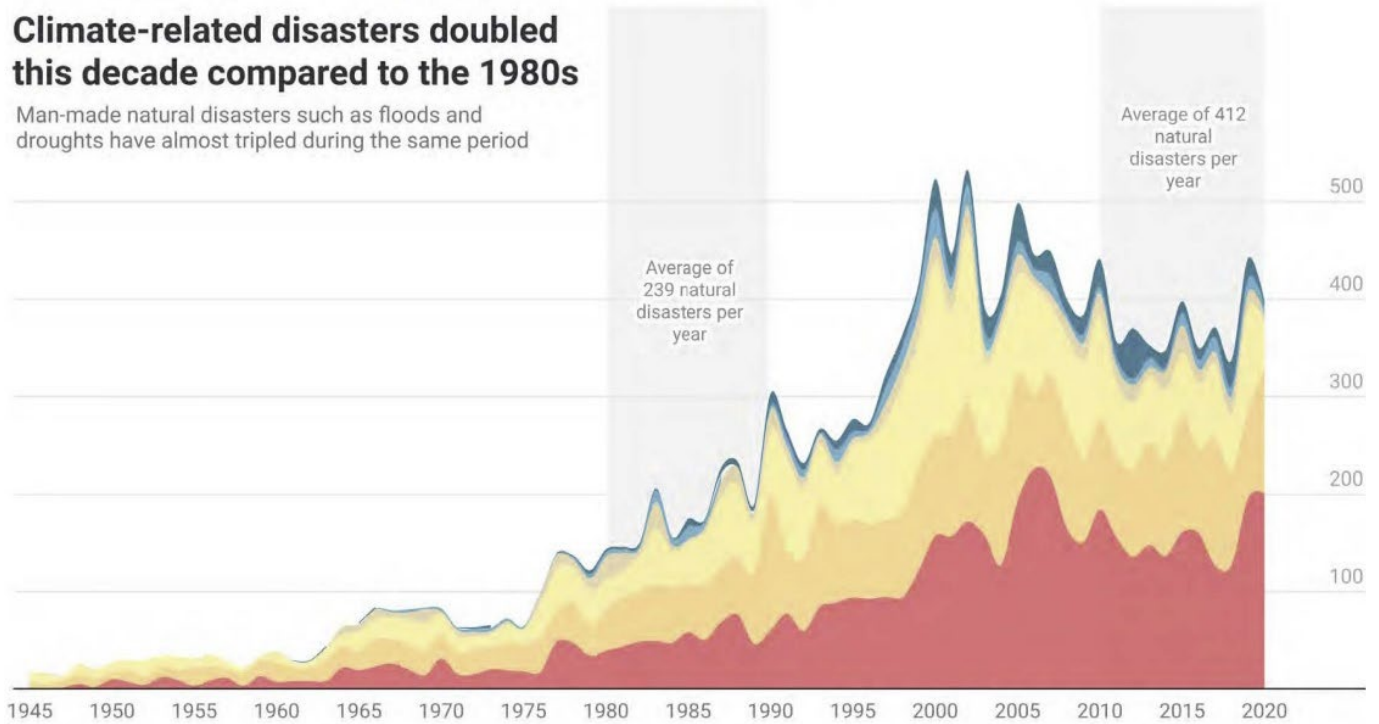
The WTO/CRED Global Humanitarian Overview 2022 data paints a stark picture. Over the past two decades, climate-related disasters have nearly doubled (Figure 1). In 2021, weather-related hazards were the leading cause of internal displacement (Figure 2).² Even under the most optimistic scenarios, the repercussions of climate change and biodiversity loss are likely to worsen. Ecosystem service disruptions are becoming entrenched due to a global delay in preventive and adaptive actions.

The projected increase in climate-related disasters³ is expected to be driven by more small and medium-scale events, which, unfortunately, attract the least humanitarian assistance. Adding to the complexity is the growing vulnerability of people, particularly in developing nations experiencing rapid urbanization

■ Droughts
 ■ Extreme temperatures
 ■ Floods
 ■ Storms
 ■ Wildfires
 ■ Others

Climate-related disasters doubled this decade compared to the 1980s

Man-made natural disasters such as floods and droughts have almost tripled during the same period

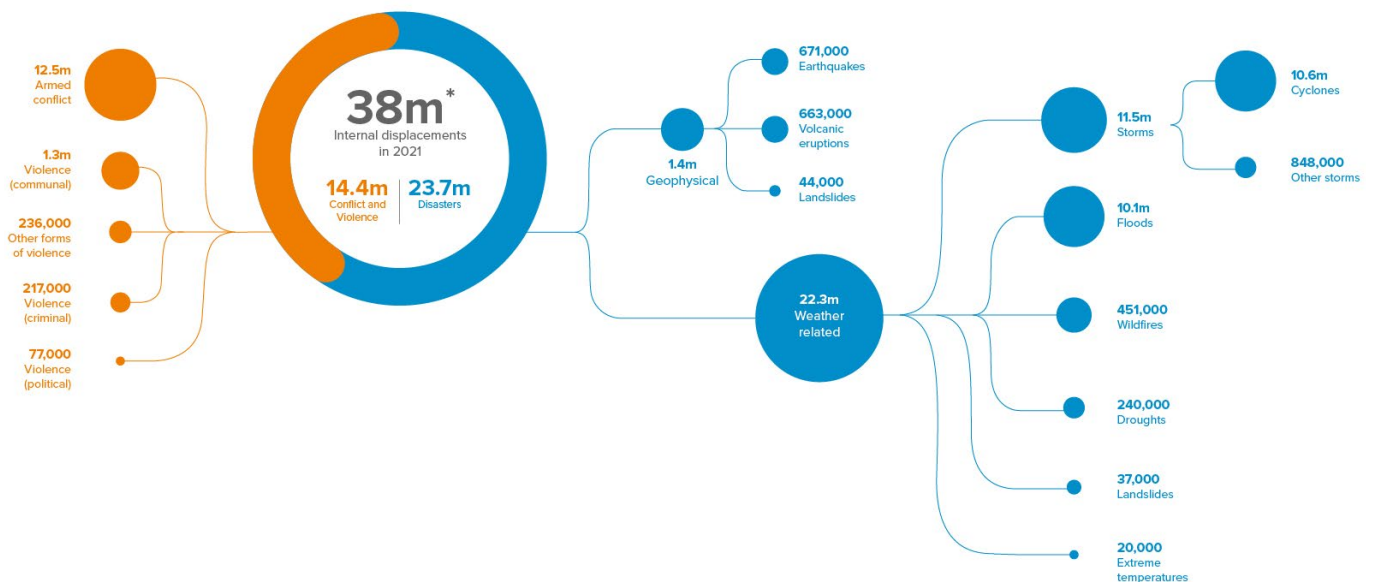


Others: Earthquakes, Epidemics, Infestations, Landslides, Mass movements and Volcanoes

Chart: Global Humanitarian Overview 2022 • Source: WTO/CRED

Figure 1: Change in climate-related disasters over time

Internal displacements breakdown by conflict, violence and disasters in 2021



IDMC internal displacement monitoring centre

*Due to rounding, some totals may not correspond with the sum of the separate figures.

Figure 2: Internal displacement breakdown (IDMC, 2021)

and expanding slums on precarious land. Factors such as the global food crisis and economic downturn further contribute to increased vulnerability. The escalating frequency and intensity of climate-related disasters, coupled with these socioeconomic challenges, create challenging conditions that humanitarian organizations must navigate.

Adding complexity to the situation, those regions most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change and environmental issues are also the primary sources of refugees (Figure 3). Those countries, least prepared to adapt, host approximately 70% of internally displaced individuals affected by conflict and violence. This underscores the need for humanitarian strategies to better address the evolving challenges of climate-induced migration.

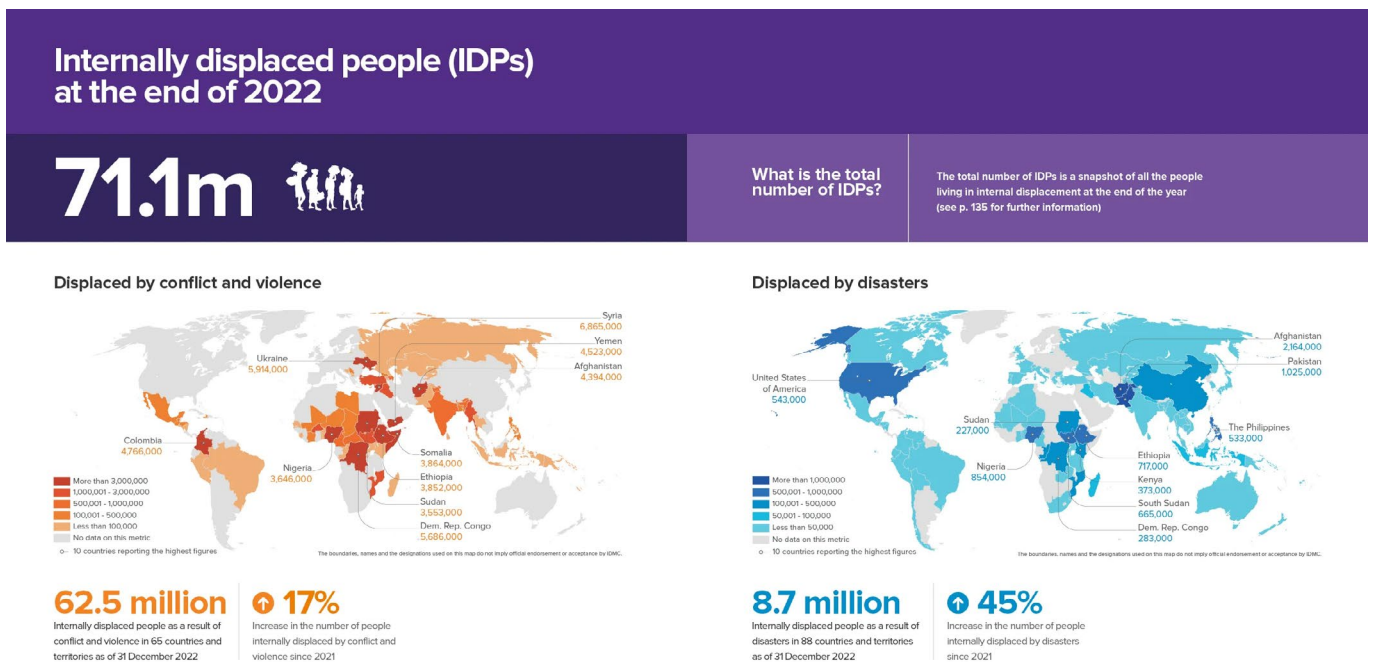


Figure 3: Number of internally displaced people by region

The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) reported that in 2022 alone, 32.6 million people were displaced due to climate-related reasons, surpassing the 28.3 million displaced by conflict.

During the consultations, practitioners confirmed that they are acutely aware that they face a new normal; one in which people move back and forth between places, driven by several factors, including environmental degradation. Humanitarian organizations increasingly need to support communities affected by such environmental degradation. That support includes preserving jobs and ensuring access to enough water and food at a time when climate change constantly shifts the distribution and availability of those commodities.

“... climate is not merely an additional ‘issue’ on the list of cross-cutting priorities; it has become a constant and rapidly emerging global disaster with universal reach. This transformative reality demands a paradigm shift in the humanitarian ethos.”⁴

Hugo Slim, Senior Research Fellow, University of Oxford

The convergence of climate change, humanitarian crises, and displacement presents an unprecedented challenge. As the numbers of climate migrants surge, humanitarian organizations are looking to redesign their approaches to uphold the coping mechanisms of affected communities, preserve livelihoods, and navigate the intensifying competition for resources.

The rise in the number and intensity of climate-related disasters, fueled by climate change, has positioned the climate emergency as the dominant context in which all humanitarians operate.

InterAction started this initiative with a series of consultations, webinars, and expert panels, in which 300 participated. Consultations included:

- Discussions at Climate Advocacy, Disaster Risk Reduction, and Shelter and Settlement working group meetings
- Simulation exercises on adaptation practices
- Expert panels and best practices from InterAction Members
- Special sessions at Regional Shelter forums (Senegal, Jordan, Colombia, and Bangladesh)
- Global Shelter Cluster and Shelter Center meetings
- Country consultations and research in Bangladesh and Pakistan
- Individual interviews with climate and environmental experts from humanitarian organizations

Findings from InterAction’s consultations regarding the challenge and required response

In these dialogues, senior practitioners reveal an understanding of climate change and environmental degradation as intricately linked phenomena that necessitate distinctive yet harmonized responses. A unanimous point of agreement is that the escalating crises are not abstract concepts or distant statistics. They are the harsh and present realities impacting countless lives. They materialize by increasing needs for disaster relief and support for affected communities.

At the same time, within the humanitarian community, though it is evident that action must be taken, determining the specifics remains a significant obstacle: What is the plan? Who will execute it? Who will finance it? And how do we coordinate?

There is a consensus that, regrettably, numerous discussions attempting to solve these issues happen in silos with humanitarian, development, climate, and environment stakeholders having limited coordination. They use different terminology, participate in separate events, and form parallel systems. This leads to misaligned priorities about who should act, when, and how; and the perception that certain aspects are another group's responsibility. Ultimately, this means people's needs are not sufficiently addressed on the necessary scale.

Additionally, what frequently goes unnoticed is the fact that the very transportation systems, infrastructure, and supply chains underpinning humanitarian operations also contribute significantly to greenhouse gas emissions, pollution, and habitat destruction.

Consequently, we confront a paradox—a cycle where environmental crises breed humanitarian needs, and our actions to meet those needs inadvertently contribute to further environmental degradation. This underscores the need for swift and transformative action.

In response to these challenges, numerous approaches have been presented by the humanitarian community. Some are now working on reducing their carbon footprint by increasing local procurement, improving efficiency, and reviewing supply chains. Others endorse community-based strategies that harness Indigenous knowledge, local leadership, and resources to enhance resilience in the face of environmental shocks. Solutions, such as the use of solar power, agroforestry, and eco-friendly shelters, have shown promise in mitigating our impact on the environment.

¹ British Red Cross. (2023, March 8). The climate crisis: why the world must act now. <https://www.redcross.org.uk/stories/disasters-and-emergencies/world/the-climate-crisis>

² IDMC 2022, Global Report on Internal Displacement 2022

³ United Nations. (2021, September 1). Climate and weather-related disasters surge five-fold over 50 years, but early warnings save lives - WMO report <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/09/1098662>

⁴ Slim, H. (2023, June 28). Humanitarians and the Climate Emergency. The Ethical, Practice and Cultural Changes. <https://gppi.net/2023/06/28/humanitarians-and-the-climate-emergency>

2 CHAPTER 2. MEETING THE CHALLENGE: INITIAL OBSERVATIONS ON TRANSFORMING HUMANITARIAN OPERATIONS

“Today’s climate and environmental crises threaten the survival of humanity. All dimensions of our lives are affected, from our physical and mental health to our food, water, and economic security. While the crises are impacting everyone, those who have contributed least to the problem are hit hardest – and it is only getting worse.”

The Climate and Environment Charter for Humanitarian Organizations

The intensifying impacts of climate change are prompting the humanitarian sector to reassess its emergency response model. As climate-related disasters become more frequent and severe, the conventional reliance on reactive measures is proving insufficient. An alternative strategy emphasizing anticipation, resilience, and climate adaptation is gaining traction, aiming to empower vulnerable communities in the face of escalating challenges.

Traditionally, humanitarian interventions have focused on short-term relief efforts, providing immediate aid like first-aid kits, food packages, and temporary shelters after sudden-onset disasters. However, with climate change, this reactive model faces significant problems. Rebuilding infrastructure only to see it damaged again or rehabilitating farmland with diminishing returns highlights the need for a response considering each disaster’s long-term impact. As impacts accelerate everywhere, addressing each disaster in isolation increases communities’ dependence on external assistance. While the humanitarian sector competes for limited funds – intended to address relief needs rather than underlying systemic issues – targeted communities become more vulnerable.

Slowly, the sector is moving its focus to prevention, preparedness, and resilience. This shift involves substantial investments in local capacity and resources, empowering communities to stand on their own in the face of recurring shocks. New approaches like forecast-based financing, which releases funds for preparedness based on climate predictions and vulnerability data, represent positive steps. However, scaling these approaches necessitates securing more flexible, longer-term support from donors accustomed to visible crisis responses.

The Climate and Environment Charter for Humanitarian Organizations represents a critical step in explicitly incorporating environmental protection into humanitarian principles. Recognizing the interconnectedness of human and environmental well-being, the charter reflects a growing awareness of the ethical imperative to safeguard the broader ecosystem in the face of climate change.

Findings from InterAction's consultations on transforming humanitarian operations

Consultations with humanitarian groups reveal a sector grappling to address the climate emergency's mounting impacts. While awareness is growing, solutions in practice remain limited.

Many organizations have signed commitments such as the Climate and Environment Charter for Humanitarian Organizations to address climate change through their activities. Donors are also placing greater emphasis on climate and environmental standards, releasing minimum requirements for funding recipients.

Note: InterAction's Member organizations' 2020 commitments included a better understanding of the challenges of climate change, environmental degradation, and biodiversity loss on our humanitarian and development work; they have been renewed in 2023 and will be reviewed in 2025.⁵

The Annual Member Survey of 2022 highlighted the major challenges encountered by Members in improving climate mainstreaming in programs and internal environmental sustainability, due to conflicting priorities and insufficient technical expertise to work on climate issues. Budgetary limitations do not seem to be the most relevant bottleneck any longer, but rather people's bandwidth and time.⁶ The Annual Member Values and Principles Commitment of 2023 includes a commitment to a healthy planet and public good.⁷

Some organizations are starting to develop policies and strategies focused on decarbonization and environmental sustainability, signaling a growing prioritization of these issues. A few organizations are also building specialist in-house environmental expertise, although they remain limited and concentrated at headquarters rather than field level.

Nonetheless, discussions at our recent consultation on Climate and Environment highlighted that many humanitarian organizations still struggle to substantially integrate climate adaptation and environmental sustainability into their work. The approach often remains "business as usual," with an emphasis on doing no harm rather than proactively addressing climate risks or greening humanitarian operations.

Disaster risk reduction (DRR) initiatives are often the main entry point for humanitarians to engage with climate change adaptation. Yet, progress is hampered by a lack of in-house expertise and technical capacity on environmental issues. Institutionalizing knowledge and learning take time. Organizations find it difficult to retain staff and consultants, especially in climate and environmental initiatives or in mainstreaming, when it is not specifically funded.

Humanitarian agencies have gained their DRR expertise mainly in conflict settings responding to displacement, winterization, and drought crises. However, a critical gap exists in their preparedness for natural disasters, especially those beyond the conventional scope – extreme urban heatwaves, forest fires, etc.

Note: Most humanitarian organizations have rarely had to respond to extreme urban heatwaves, forest fires, and the consequences of intense pollution.

Additionally, the default disaster response model, mobilizing support only after crises have struck, is perceived as limited and increasingly obsolete considering the current climate crisis. Because of constrained funds and the imperative to act earlier, the humanitarian sector is starting to use forecasting, anticipatory action, and early action to mitigate predictable shocks.

For example, weather forecasts and vulnerability assessments within the anticipatory action framework enable agencies to identify extreme weather events days or weeks in advance, triggering predetermined action plans to preemptively protect lives and livelihoods.

The evidence⁸ is convincing. Responding early requires fewer resources than retrospective relief efforts. Rapidly deploying emergency cash and supplies or triggering safe evacuation and temporary relocations enables local communities to implement measures that directly mitigate hazards. Early intervention allows for the introduction of contingency plans and social safety nets, enabling communities to better withstand future shocks. Conversely, a traditional recovery strategy that merely replaces lost assets without addressing vulnerabilities constitutes a form of harm through negligence. Still, funding models face institutional and political constraints and reluctance to embrace forecast-based approaches.

Note: A limited number of staff members can describe the links between the increasing occurrences of floods, storms, and droughts and the breakdown of the environment. Terms such as climate mitigation and adaptation often lack clarity or appear on the periphery rather than shaping organizational priorities. Additionally, there is now a tendency to view any natural disaster as a consequence of climate change even when it derives from slow-onset environmental degradation.

Many humanitarian agencies struggle to integrate environmental considerations into their strategies and operations. This hinders the integration of climate change adaptation within broader disaster response frameworks. Agencies acknowledge the need for specialist support, and many have created “Green Teams” or similar structures, comprising experts with the knowledge and skills to navigate the intersection of humanitarian action and environmental sustainability. These specialized teams foster a more informed and proactive approach to DRR that aligns with the imperatives of climate change adaptation.

At the field level, while DRR provides a valuable framework, humanitarian implementation can disempower local communities. Despite good intentions, the tendency to impose top-down directives often disregards local knowledge of risks and capacities. It can also create conflicting priorities and dependence on aid by framing locals as passive “beneficiaries” rather than active first responders. This inhibits self-reliance so vital for climate adaptation. Actions supporting local leadership are therefore essential.

Finally, a compartmentalized approach to operations hampers effective humanitarian efforts. Climate and environmental concerns are frequently dealt with in isolation rather than being integrated into broader strategies. This siloed approach results in an uncoordinated and incohesive approach to addressing climate change.

Addressing this challenge requires “climate-smart”⁹ programming, where climate risks and adaptation considerations are included in every phase of the response. From the initial stages of preparedness and contingency planning to the actual response and subsequent recovery efforts, there is a need to consider climate factors at every step. The current approach often neglects environmental sustainability, treating it as an afterthought rather than a priority in policies and operations.



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Note: Failure to integrate climate-smart programming into humanitarian responses risks necessitating future retrofitting to address climate-related challenges. This retroactive approach not only strains already limited resources but also lacks efficiency, potentially fostering aid dependencies. Additionally, there are inherent reputational risks with repercussions for accountability to affected populations. Including climate-smart initiatives from the outset is not just a strategic imperative; it proactively enhances the resilience and sustainability of humanitarian efforts, mitigating the need for costly and less effective retrofitting.

Addressing these systemic and capacity issues will require dedicated leadership, resources, and collaboration. However, these are essential for the humanitarian sector to evolve its role in the face of the climate crisis, uphold its commitments, and contribute positively to climate change adaptation and mitigation worldwide.

⁵ InterAction (2023). The NGO Climate Compact 2.0. InterAction. <https://www.interaction.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Climate-Compact.pdf>

⁶ InterAction (2022). Forging Ahead, NGO Climate Compact Report on Progress to Date from the Annual Member Survey. InterAction and the David & Lucille Packard Foundation. <https://www.interaction.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Forging-Ahead-NGO-Climate-Compact-Report-on-Progress-to-Date-from-the-Annual-Member-Survey.pdf>

⁷ InterAction. (nd). Annual Member Values and Principles Commitment. 2023 Implementation. InterAction <https://www.interaction.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Annual-Members-Values-and-Principles-Commitment.pdf>

⁸ Based on a cost analysis by the Central Emergency Response Fund, the proactive approach to address flooding in Bangladesh in 2020 proved \$10 more cost-effective per person supported compared to the reactive response to similar flooding in 2017. The FAO asserts that each dollar invested in anticipatory actions resulted in households experiencing returns of up to nine times the amount in avoided losses and additional benefits. <https://www.unocha.org/bangladesh-monsoon-flooding-2020-anticipatory-action-pilot> <https://www.fao.org/3/cc7900en/online/impact-of-disasters-on-agriculture-and-food-2023/anticipatory-action-interventions.html>

⁹ IFRC. (2023). A Guide to Climate-Smart Programmes and Humanitarian Operations. Using Climate Information Across Timelines to Enhance Humanitarian Efforts. IFRC. https://www.ifrc.org/sites/default/files/2023-08/Red-Cross-Red-Crescent-Guide-to-Climate-Smart-Programmes_0.pdf

3 CHAPTER 3. MITIGATION — STATE OF PLAY AND RELATED CHALLENGES

“Global warming, reaching 1.5°C in the near-term, would cause unavoidable increases in multiple climate hazards and present multiple risks to ecosystems and humans. The level of risk will depend on concurrent near-term trends in vulnerability, exposure, level of socioeconomic development, and adaptation. Near-term actions that limit global warming to close to 1.5°C would substantially reduce projected losses and damages”

IPCC Sixth Assessment Report — Summary for Policymakers

Mitigation refers to efforts that reduce or avoid greenhouse gas emissions, limiting human-caused climate change. With the extreme impacts already unfolding worldwide, mitigating future warming is critical.

The more mitigation measures put in place in line with the Paris Agreement,¹⁰ the greater the chance for the most exposed and vulnerable communities to operate and live within their adaptation boundaries and manage to live with the impacts of climate change, environmental degradation, and biodiversity loss in their geographies. The IPCC tells us that the window we have to act is rapidly closing if global warming is allowed to increase beyond 1.5° C. In our intention to limit loss and damage, based on the do-no-harm principle, we must embrace mitigation measures in all sectors and at all levels of activity, including humanitarian and developmental. Such an approach implies a shift in structures, implementation frameworks, and methods for most organizations.

The IASC Climate Sub-Group points out humanitarian organizations’ key role in filling the mitigation, adaptation, protection, and response gaps they report. “The global climate policy framework on Loss and Damage”¹¹ lists four steps to avert, minimize, and address risk:

- **Avert risk:** The more greenhouse gas emissions are reduced, the less climate risk will be faced, and the smaller the mitigation gap.
- **Manage risk:** The more livelihoods and well-being are adapted to the changing climate, the better the risk will be managed, and the smaller the adaptation gap.
- **Transfer residual risk:** The stronger the social and financial protection provided, the more risk will be transferred and the smaller the protection gap.
- **Retain residual risk:** The better relief, rehabilitation, and relocation support is, the fewer negative impacts will be experienced and the smaller the response gap.



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Note: Humanitarian organizations need to develop a coordinated approach between headquarters and field level, in the understanding that localization is an integral part of the theory of change we need to embrace. As stated by the InterAction Climate Compact, “To align with the Paris Agreement’s goal of limiting the average global temperature increase to 1.5°C (2.7°F), and to credibly and effectively convince others to follow, our organizations must accelerate change on multiple fronts immediately, regardless of where we are in our development on this issue.”¹²

Additionally, the second commitment of the Climate and Environment Charter for Humanitarian Organizations explicitly refers to the need to “maximize the environmental sustainability of our work and rapidly reduce our greenhouse gas emissions.” This means that signatory organizations need to measure their emissions, called carbon accounting.

Although the humanitarian sector is not among the most polluting industries, it cannot avoid a responsibility to act, as stated in the “Climate and Environment Charter for Humanitarian Organizations.” It extends the principle of do-no-harm to the environment. This means acting on its transportation carbon footprint and analyzing and understanding the life cycle¹³ of a product or service used to make informed choices or find alternatives in line with its environmental goals.

A summary of InterAction's consultations regarding mitigation efforts

Climate change mitigation has risen on the agenda of humanitarian groups amid growing recognition of the climate emergency's urgency. Major donors have introduced environmental minimum standards, pushing for emissions reductions in aid delivery. However, these requirements are also perceived by some as an additional layer of complexity since standards vary across. Recent consultations with humanitarian organizations reveal mixed progress on "greening" operations.

Note: In Colombia, an international organization has directed its implementation partners to transition to a paperless approach, eliminating budget allocations for printing. Because of this environmental requirement, one implementing partner found itself compelled to print informational and hygiene promotion messages on plastic flyers for distribution among the migrating population. This shift resulted in the creation of a trail of plastic waste along the migration route, particularly concerning as it occurred in one of the country's most ecologically sensitive and protected areas. This unintentional outcome underscores the importance of aligning sustainable practices with environmental goals, ensuring that well-intentioned initiatives do not inadvertently contribute to ecological challenges.

Many organizations have analyzed their carbon footprint and developed emissions reduction plans, signaling growing momentum. However, they face barriers in implementing these plans. A key challenge is funding constraints, as most donor grants cover program expenses only. Groups have difficulty securing support for core investments like staff and infrastructure to enable decarbonization.

Internal issues like staff turnover and lack of dedicated environmental positions also slow progress. Greater management commitment is required in some groups to prioritize climate action amid competing demands. Interest exists in aligning efforts through sector-wide mitigation principles on issues like emissions accounting methods. But common standards have yet to be established.

Local partners are vital in greening aid as responsibilities shift due to localization initiatives. However, they often lack environmental expertise. Capacity building for local actors is essential but still limited.

Some promising initiatives are underway at the field level, including sustainable procurement, renewable energy projects, nature-based solutions, climate-smart agriculture, waste management, and travel emission reductions. However, mitigation-specific activities remain small in scale and scope.



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Humanitarian groups want donors to recognize their expanding mandates and provide targeted resources for greening aid. They call for coordinated support to address data and technical capacity gaps. While tensions exist between rapid response and eco-friendly action, progress is essential given the climate crisis. With strategic backing, the sector can chart a path to carbon-neutral assistance while continuing lifesaving work worldwide.

While momentum builds, significant obstacles hinder humanitarian groups from achieving real emissions reductions.

A central tension lies between the urgency of disaster response and mitigation aims. Lifesaving activities often rely on carbon-heavy transport, because green options are felt impractical. Reconciling rapid relief and sustainability is difficult. Much aid work still centers on emergency response and building community resilience, with limited focus on direct climate change mitigation. Activities like reforestation remain small in scale compared to frontline assistance. Mitigation expertise is still scarce in the sector.

Data deficits on emissions baselines and mitigation impacts impede target setting. Far more carbon footprint quantification and progress tracking are needed to inform ambitious goals. Technical knowledge requirements for mitigation also exceed current capacities. More training and collaboration with environmental experts are essential to design and implement eco-friendly initiatives.

Additionally, accessing finance poses a significant bottleneck. Funding for mitigation work is hard to secure.

¹⁰ United Nations Climate Change. (nd). The Paris Agreement. What is the Paris Agreement? <https://unfccc.int/process-and-meetings/the-paris-agreement>

¹¹ IASC Climate Crisis Sub-Group. (2023). On Averting, Minimizing and Addressing Loss and Damage From a Humanitarian Perspective. IASC. <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/sites/default/files/migrated/2023-09/IASC%20Key%20Messages%20on%20Averting%2C%20Minimizing%20and%20Addressing%20Loss%20and%20Damage%20from%20a%20Humanitarian%20Perspective.pdf>

¹² InterAction (2023). The NGO Climate Compact 2.0. InterAction. <https://www.interaction.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Climate-Compact.pdf>

¹³ A life cycle analysis will include both global and local impacts categories. It will also analyze the production, the use, and the end-of-life disposal of a product.

4 CHAPTER 4. ADAPTATION — STATE OF PLAY AND RELATED CHALLENGES

“Despite progress, adaptation gaps exist between current levels of adaptation and levels needed to respond to impacts and reduce climate risks. Most observed adaptation is fragmented, small in scale, incremental, sector-specific, designed to respond to current impacts or near-term risks, and focused more on planning rather than implementation. Observed adaptation is unequally distributed across regions, and gaps are partially driven by widening disparities between the estimated costs of adaptation and documented finance allocated to adaptation. The largest adaptation gaps exist among lower-income population groups.”

IPCC Sixth Assessment Report — Summary for Policymakers

Adaptation to climate change involves adjusting to the current or anticipated climate conditions and their effects. This strategic adjustment moderates potential harm and capitalizes on advantageous opportunities. Effective adaptation measures become imperative to navigate and alleviate the adverse impacts of our current course of action.

Adaptation is not a one-size-fits-all solution but rather an ongoing, iterative process. It involves learning from past experiences, acknowledging successes and failures, and continuously monitoring and evaluating strategies. A comprehensive approach to adaptation recognizes the intricate interplay of social, political, economic, and environmental factors contributing to vulnerability and compound risks. This perspective helps prevent maladaptation and the use of harmful coping strategies, fostering overall community resilience in the face of environmental and conflict-related challenges.

The humanitarian community recognizes the array of approaches to climate adaptation, from technical and engineering solutions to adjustments in local communities’ social, institutional, or governance systems. At the community level, adapting to climate change and environmental degradation often involves shifts or diversification in livelihoods and income sources. However, our consultations reveal that local, small-scale initiatives mainly focus on enhancing individual and community resilience rather than explicitly delving into climate adaptation. Moreover, these initiatives face significant barriers, such as limited access to structured climate finance.

Humanitarians will continue to assist displaced individuals and those at risk of displacement, especially those experiencing recurrent or prolonged displacement. However, improved collaboration across sectors will be essential to deal effectively with the number of people expected to require such assistance. That will benefit from collecting robust evidence derived from the outcomes of various adaptation efforts. Strengthening environmental and climate data and information services is integral to this approach. Another crucial aspect is the need for enhanced collaboration across the humanitarian development-peace nexus. By coordinating efforts, organizations can leverage their unique mandates and expertise to assist vulnerable communities better, optimize resources, and ensure a more comprehensive and effective response to evolving climate-related issues.

Facilitating locally led adaptation requires a strategic focus on devolved decision making, dismantling structural inequalities, and investing in local capabilities through flexible programming. Humanitarian organizations must work closely with local communities to address community needs effectively. This collaborative approach allows humanitarian organizations to leverage existing initiatives, enhance local leadership and ownership, and build capacities contributing to long-term adaptive outcomes.

The Settlements Approach¹⁴ conceptualizes whole of population in crisis, engaged through a collaborative multi-sector and multi-stakeholder approach. It emphasizes the holistic perspective of human habitation in space. A settlement is not just about physical structures, but also the intricate social economic, and environmental dynamics that shape people's lives within it.

Similarly, a landscape or ecological approach conceptualizes natural elements, such as crops, livestock, soil, trees, and water sources, as integrally linked.

Both approaches overlap and are complementary in generating an understanding of structures and systems connecting all populations. For example, both approaches are intersectoral, both work with the community, identify risk, and interrogate the sociopolitical and sociocultural context of human habitation. Ultimately, humans and their shelter and settlements take place within, and not separate from, the natural environment.

Finally, enabling adaptation in both urban and rural settings relies on better preparedness approaches, including anticipatory action. It is imperative to view adaptation, anticipatory action, and preparedness as interconnected elements within the broader framework of responses to climate change and environmental degradation. This integrated approach emphasizes the need for proactive measures and readiness, acknowledging the interdependence of these elements in ensuring a resilient and adaptive response to the complex challenges of climate change.

Nonetheless, it's essential to recognize that humanitarian actions alone cannot fully meet the diverse needs of communities or bridge the existing gaps in climate financing. Responsibility for *addressing climate change and environmental impacts lies primarily with governments and development stakeholders*. Governments have the power to enact policies and regulations that can mitigate the effects and adopt and promote sustainable development. Nationwide Disaster Risk Management responsibility also falls under the respective governments. There is a need for coherent national policies and regulations. Regardless, there is consensus among agencies that climate and environmental concerns and responsibilities should be shared.

Findings from InterAction's consultations on adaptation

Adaptation has become a focus for the humanitarian community. Key adaptation programming areas emerged in recent consultations with humanitarian organizations and InterAction Members.

A major adaptation focus reported is integrating climate change projections into disaster readiness efforts. This uses climate modeling to guide preparedness, early warning, and risk reduction. For example, projections on shifting rainfall patterns, heatwaves, and other climate impacts can inform where relief supplies are pre-positioned. If models indicate an area is likely to see increased extreme rainfall, stocks of emergency shelter materials and WASH supplies can be strategically positioned there ahead of time. Climate impact projections also allow responders to target at-risk locations for disaster training and capacity building. Based on heatwave projections, urban communities can be prioritized for outreach on heat resilience measures, such as establishing cooling centers and checking on vulnerable neighbors during extreme heat.

Projections can also guide contingency planning and ad-hoc solutions. If models show a city facing heightened flood risk, scenarios can be developed and measures mapped out to evacuate high-risk zones, including informal settlements. Early warning systems can give these communities enough notice to allow orderly evacuation. Climate modeling enables responders to anticipate new climate risk hotspots allowing time to put preventive measures in place through training, planning, and positioning supplies. Preparedness plans can be updated as projections are refined. Yet modeling has limitations. Not all climate impacts can be accurately projected, especially at local levels. Communities' vulnerability also evolves. Responders must pair modeling with monitoring actual climate impacts and working closely with at-risk groups.

Many groups highlighted investing in resilient WASH infrastructure as an adaptation priority. This involves designing sustainable facilities to withstand climate impacts. For flood-prone regions, elevating latrines and water storage on raised platforms above projected flood levels provides protection. Boreholes can be drilled at greater depths to access receding groundwater during droughts. Water capture

and storage systems are critical for adapting to variable rainfall. Dams and reservoirs also provide water storage capacity across rainfall cycles. Risk factors like salinity intrusion from sea-level rise are considered when infrastructure and site planning. This prevents contamination that can render water points unusable. Sustainable construction materials are also prioritized to minimize environmental strain. Some of these or similar measures have been in practice for several decades but were again highlighted or becoming more common.

Many organizations also reported providing climate-smart agriculture assistance to help smallholder farmers adapt sustainably and contribute to better access to food for the wider community. Adjusting planting calendars aligns crop cycles with shifting rain patterns. Access to climate projections and early warnings facilitates planning. Drought-tolerant seeds, drip irrigation, and practices like mulching build resilience to hotter and drier conditions. Diversifying income with small livestock or other activities creates fallback options when crops fail. Agroforestry systems incorporating trees into farmland are encouraged for climate adaptation and emissions reduction benefits. Trees provide shade and soil nutrients while absorbing carbon.

Nature-based solutions are gaining traction as sustainable alternatives to conventional gray infrastructure for adapting to climate change impacts. Rather than relying solely on hard engineering measures like dams and seawalls, nature-based solutions use ecosystem conservation, restoration, and management. These enhance climate resilience while providing additional social, economic, and environmental benefits. For example, urban forestry initiatives form cooler green corridors, reducing urban heat island effects. Reforestation stabilizes hillside soils, mitigating landslide risks. Wetland restoration regulates flooding and enhances water security during droughts.

In 2023, the Sphere Association released guidance on nature-based solutions for climate resilience. The guidance highlights the potential for nature-based solutions to boost community preparedness, response, and recovery in a changing climate. They can be more cost-effective and sustainable than large infrastructure interventions. Communities often hold deep knowledge of local ecosystems to inform contextualized nature-based solutions. However, quantifying adaptation benefits within relatively short funding timeframes can be difficult, and conflicts may arise if local tenure rights are not respected.

While systematic examples remain limited, humanitarians operating in the field are increasingly working toward climate-resilient settlements. This involves planning and developing climate-proof housing, buildings, and land use to protect vulnerable communities. For new settlements, adequate drainage, elevated structures, and climate-appropriate building materials can be incorporated into designs to reduce climate impacts. Settlements can be intentionally zoned to restrict construction in high-risk areas and preserve greenspace for flood and heat mitigation. Early warning systems, evacuation plans, and disaster response capacities can also be integrated into planning processes.



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For existing settlements, key measures include raising flood-prone houses on plinths above projected flood levels and installing natural barriers like levees. On higher ground, community facilities like multi-purpose storm shelters and access routes for evacuation can be established. Upgrading drainage and sanitation infrastructure is also important to withstand increased flooding. Houses and community buildings can be retrofitted with features like air vents and mosquito screens to manage rising temperatures and disease risks.

While relocation may be unavoidable as a last resort for extremely vulnerable settlements, this should be done in close consultation with residents to preserve community ties. Settlement mapping tools can help identify sustainable relocation sites.

A core challenge remains transitioning from scattered small-scale pilots to large-scale implementation of climate-resilient settlements. More consistent funding, technical support, and government buy-in are needed to take these solutions to scale. Partnerships with local communities are essential to ensure local needs shape the process. But when designed inclusively through community-led processes, climate-smart settlements can provide vulnerable groups with a stronger foundation of resilience to confront escalating climate change threats.

Finally, the call for forecast-based financing and increased anticipatory action approaches are gaining traction to build resilience and enable timelier responses to disasters amplified by climate change. Forecast-based financing releases humanitarian funding automatically based on climate predictions before an extreme event strikes. In disasters intensified by climate change, early interventions enabled by predictions can be highly effective for adaptation. Evacuations, needs assessments, cash distributions, and other responses can commence ahead of peak impacts. Initial evidence demonstrates significant returns from acting early according to predictions. Studies show that anticipatory action can dramatically boost cost-efficiency and reduce disaster damage compared to traditional response timelines.

This enables preparation based on forecasts rather than waiting for confirmed disaster impacts. Early interventions like evacuations, supply pre-positioning, and needs assessments can commence before peak impacts.

Despite all this, systematic approaches to integrate climate risks and resilience into humanitarian policies and preparedness programs remain rare, with climate-proofing often confined to isolated projects rather than mainstreamed through coordinated strategies. This fragments efforts and limits scale-up.

Additionally, inadequate knowledge, forecasting data, analytical capabilities, and practical skills hinder identifying context-specific, evidence-based solutions. Crucial technical capacities need strengthening across stakeholders to enable informed adaptation planning and implementation. Further compounding matters, urgent humanitarian crises, and immediate lifesaving priorities relegate adaptation to the backburner. Yet integrating resilience-building into emergency response would provide vital opportunities to elevate its priority amid competing needs.

Coherent adaptation initiatives are also impeded by poor collaboration between humanitarian, development, and environmental actors working in institutional silos. Joint analysis, planning, and funding across pillars are indispensable to break down walls and enable synergistic approaches. Moreover, the humanitarian community focuses on rapid relief over months, while meaningful adaptation requires permanent systemic transformations over longer timeframes to profoundly modify human and natural systems.

¹⁴ Urban Settlements Working Group (2020). The Settlements Approach Guidance Note. Global Shelter Cluster, USWG, USAID, InterAction, CRS & Impact Initiatives. <https://www.interaction.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Guidance-Settlements.pdf>

5 CHAPTER 5. FIELD-LEVEL COORDINATION — STATE OF PLAY AND GOOD PRACTICES

Recent consultations reveal major gaps in climate and environmental analysis and coordination at the field operational level, hampering effective response.

A consistent shortcoming is the need for actionable climate risk assessments in humanitarian needs overviews (HNOs) and humanitarian response plans (HRPs). These often contain no more than broad statements about climate change exacerbating existing challenges, failing to provide the localized insights necessary to understand how shifting climate variables might uniquely affect different communities, livelihoods, and systems.

This prevents strategies from being tailored to climate change impacts. As climate change interacts with geography, livelihoods, and fragility, it does so in distinct ways, rendering one-size-fits-all responses ineffective.

Furthermore, HNOs and HRPs rarely translate climate predictions into short-term guidance for adaptive programming. While they may reference long-term climate projections, they frequently lack actionable short-term forecasts and scenarios for any analysis.

Yet these short-term forecasts are essential for a climate-smart response. They indicate where needs may suddenly escalate and how programs can pre-emptively boost resilience before peak impacts arise. Without integrating climate predictions into action, efforts cannot adapt to future threats.

Robust climate risk analysis requires coordination between sectors and clusters, but differing mandates and institutional silos inhibit collaboration. Efforts remain confined within traditional clusters rather than enabling integrated inter-sectoral approaches.

Note: The humanitarian community requires tools and information that are actionable and relevant to specific contexts. Short-term climate forecasts, tailored to local conditions and informed by expertise, are essential for informing climate-smart programming and operations. This necessitates collaboration beyond the traditional humanitarian sphere, integrating the knowledge of local and national actors in areas like climate science, DRR, risk analysis, and early warning.

Furthermore, effective early action relies on integrating locally generated climate risk information and early warnings into broader response plans. This necessitates embedding anticipatory action into HRPs, with a clear allocation of roles within humanitarian country teams (HCTs). Dedicated lead agencies, determined by country context and capacity, should explore the establishment of early action plans and facilitate communication with government actors.

Recognizing climate change as a key driver of vulnerability is crucial for crafting effective response plans. Each HCT needs to develop a policy plan that champions climate- and environmentally focused solutions, balancing sustainability goals like plastic reduction and solar energy with the immediate needs of the humanitarian community. Seeking common procurement options can facilitate this transition toward a greener future.

The need for improved climate risk analysis is undeniable. While currently included in the HNO process, the analysis often lacks consistency and does not always translate into concrete actions within HRPs. Establishing a reliable system for short and medium-term climate forecasts, coupled with an Early Warning and Early Action and Response (EWEAR) Task Force, is essential. This Task Force should integrate climate risks into risk alerts and recommend early actions to minimize humanitarian impact.

Finally, systematic utilization of HNO climate risk analysis and scenarios within HRPs is vital. By leveraging this information, HRPs can accurately set their scope and design effective responses.

Additionally, limited climate and environmental expertise among frontline humanitarian responders hinders joint efforts. Insufficient capacity strengthening and inclusion of local actors further constrain climate-smart response.

Addressing these systemic deficits is critical as climate change escalates humanitarian needs. All plans and operations must integrate context-specific climate vulnerability assessments and prediction-informed adaptive programming. Boosting partnerships with climate and environment experts alongside capacity building for responders is vital to injecting climate risk analysis into all aspects of response. Elevating local actors is also vital to ensuring community perspectives shape localized solutions.

Member perspectives also indicate the importance of collaboration between stakeholders at all levels. National governments, UN agencies, NGOs, local communities, and the private sector must work together to assess environmental risks and develop integrated solutions. Data collection and sharing through new technologies can strengthen analysis and planning.

Examples of effective coordination

Efforts to improve coordination on climate and environmental matters within humanitarian operations are growing, reflecting positive strides in collaboration, especially in crisis-affected countries. These successful examples highlight evolving good practices, emphasizing the critical need for integrated approaches.

In Cox's Bazar, the Energy and Environment Technical Working Group (EETWG) stands as a prime example. Focused on the sustainability of the Rohingya refugee response, this collaborative body brings together diverse stakeholders to address crucial environmental issues. The EETWG facilitates joint planning on matters like soil erosion, water management, and alternative fuel sources, offering a comprehensive approach to environmental management in the refugee crisis.

In Ukraine, establishing an Environmental Working Group has proven instrumental in addressing the negative environmental impacts of conflict, particularly widespread asbestos pollution. Led by specialists, this group devises strategies to mitigate risks within the broader emergency response, including mapping contaminated areas to minimize further asbestos exposure risks.

Recognizing the need for systematic approaches, Uganda has implemented dedicated coordination mechanisms to incorporate climate risks into refugee operations, particularly concerning access to fuels and energy. This has fostered improved collaboration among UN agencies and NGOs working with both refugee and host communities, aiming to mitigate environmental damage.

Venezuela demonstrated the value of tackling interconnected issues by expanding its Shelter Cluster to the "Shelter and Energy Cluster." This transformation prioritizes access to renewable energy in providing habitat solutions for vulnerable groups. At the NGO forum level, Somalia's Resilience Working Group



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unites member organizations to align programming with climate adaptation approaches, contributing to bolstering healthy ecosystems and reducing impacts on communities.

While these advancements are commendable, experts emphasize the need for further integration of environmental expertise across all sectors. They advocate for enhanced data tools and anticipatory capacity to enable the humanitarian community to proactively address climate-related impacts and risks. Strengthening coordination through multi-stakeholder collaboration and community involvement is crucial for enhancing climate and environmental outcomes in emergency response settings.

While challenges remain, humanitarians continue to explore innovative approaches to bridge operational divides between the environment, climate change adaptation, and emergency response. Many underscore the importance of scaling up local efforts through improved field-level coordination.

CHAPTER 6. KEY CONSIDERATIONS FOR THE HUMANITARIAN COMMUNITY

Acknowledge the urgency and lack of coherence

The action window is closing for humanitarian and development organizations to achieve significant impact.

There are promising and laudable efforts by individual organizations and within particular sectors. Most of these efforts are voluntary, focused on “greening” the response or operations, usually meaning reducing carbon footprint. Limited adaptation measures are also on the rise. Initiatives, often small-scale pilots, around anticipatory action mainly focus on early cash distributions, early warning, and preparedness, mirroring an entry point to disaster risk reduction practices.

Organizations participating in this research also acknowledged a system-wide lack of environmental expertise, short funding cycles, non-harmonized donor requirements, and strategic guidance as further impediments to effective environmentally smart programming. Many acknowledged the lack of system-wide climate and environmental priorities, coherence, and urgency. The humanitarian community must urgently find ways to address these shortcomings.

Foster locally led responses

Humanitarian organizations have an important role in fostering local climate and environment leadership and building local response capacity. Many examples from practitioners highlighted the role of local ingenuity and Indigenous knowledge as essential to the long-term sustainability of habitats and ecosystems. Local knowledge, supported by the latest scientific data and knowledge, community awareness, and preparedness campaigns point to the most cost-effective and scalable outcomes.

Humanitarian and development organizations must exchange knowledge and support strategic planning by facilitating access to actionable risk knowledge, translating and contextualizing information on future risks, and influencing systemic change and innovation on the ground.

Locally led initiatives require not just funding but also design, implementation, and ownership. Efforts to promote local leadership must allow the public sector to fulfill its role. In practice, it means ensuring that local aid providers have the

technical skills, funds, and influence to act before and after emergencies. It also means defining exit strategies that link local partner organizations to donors, moving humanitarian organizations beyond the role of intermediaries. All decisions must include all marginalized segments of the community.

Strengthen organizational readiness

Humanitarian organizations broadly lack the required expertise to analyze, design, and deliver context-specific climate smart programs, although a few organizations are starting to establish green teams to address this. Building the required technical expertise and refining intersectoral programming were recommended by many participants.

Humanitarian organizations must establish climate and environmental action plans that define mitigation measures and adaptation actions, both at the headquarters and field levels. Headquarters and field level disconnect in approach was also highlighted as a current weakness.

Past, present, and future risks should be considered in HNOs and HRP to support actionable short-term forecasts. While some references to climate impacts are mentioned, a cohesive strategy is often missing. Response wide environmental markers are not set, measured, or reported.

Planning and coordination systems must work with national disaster management systems and risk governance processes. The Settlements Approach, which embodies multisectoral, multistakeholder, and whole-of-population approaches to programming, should be considered. Such approaches allow local and national NGOs and local governments to play a greater lead role in disaster response while supporting existing or emerging local coordination mechanisms. Semi-formal networks and communities of practice exist and inform the use of a collective language and the need to integrate ecosystem thinking and the environment into humanitarian action.

Develop a multisectoral environmental management mechanism

Research done in parallel looking at best practices and coordination around environmental action highlighted the importance of multisectoral environmental management in a response. The report “Effective Humanitarian Responses Require Collaborative Environmental Management”¹⁵ highlights that the lack of a coordinated effort on environmental action slows the creation of necessary coalitions and hinders impact on the ground. Uncoordinated initiatives can in fact lead to maladaptation.

To facilitate joint approaches between humanitarian partners, and with development and government partners, a formal or informal multisectoral environmental management group should be set up.

All humanitarian response plans in sudden-onset scenarios and all HNOs in protracted crises should include climate and environment action priorities.

An analysis conducted by the Global Shelter Cluster in 2022 revealed that Humanitarian Needs Overviews (HNOs), Humanitarian Response Plans (HRPs), and Flash Appeals (FAs) do not adequately fully integrate environment and climate change into needs assessment, identification, and response planning. The study indicates that these documents also fell short of fully meeting the required level of environmental needs or context analysis throughout the entire content. It is noteworthy that, in contexts where cluster coordinators exhibit a strong interest in the environment, issues are consistently better mainstreamed, irrespective of the severity of the issues.¹⁶

The Inter-Agency Standing Committee has a key role in improving coordination by setting coherent policies that clearly state the need for humanitarian actors to increase their resource use efficiency, improve their operational risk management, meet environmental requirements, and deliver on predefined sustainability targets.

Donors have an advocacy role to play within the government structures they are part of and between internal humanitarian and development departments. Extending the return-on-investment timeframe beyond the project lifespan is necessary if implementing partners are to initiate longer-term adaptation programs during humanitarian responses.

Mainstreaming the protection of the environment is an initial adaptation strategy and needs to be followed throughout the program cycle, including by:

- Building internal capacity and retaining key technical expertise.
- Scaling up adaptation measures in all programs.
- Tailoring materials procurement strategies to the local ecosystem capacity, ensuring sufficient, sustainable, regenerative resources to host populations.
- Designing exit strategies that facilitate links between local organizations and donors, removing us from an intermediary role.
- Supporting and promoting traditional ecological knowledge, practices, and expertise by Indigenous and local communities.

Adopt risk-sensitive programming

Climate-smart programming¹⁷ should be informed not only by past and current risks, but also by future risks. That includes the possibility of more frequent, extreme, and unpredictable weather events, as well as slower-onset changes, such as sea-level rise and environmental degradation.

Communities need support, regardless of whether they are experiencing the impacts of climate change, lack of adaptation, DRR, or national loss and damage. The Grand Bargain¹⁸ requires organizations to move away from a centralized, command and control, one-system-fits-all approach to a system of diverse actors, where frontline responders receive adequate and timely resources.

Green the humanitarian responses

Organizations need to track direct and indirect greenhouse gas emissions through carbon accounting tools and implement emissions reduction strategies. Organizations are encouraged to collaborate with peers in reducing their carbon footprint and in raising internal and partners' awareness of green-washing risks. More sustainable humanitarian responses require organizations to ensure purchasing decisions include the results of life-cycle assessments where alternative products and services are available; reduce waste, promote reuse, re-purposing, and recycling; and invest in clean energy solutions and improve their accessibility.

Donors should integrate environmental and climate change action principles into the "Good Humanitarian Donorship"¹⁹ Initiative and in-house policies and practices. This would help the humanitarian community to build its capacity in that area. Initiatives in support of the implementation of the Climate and Environment Charter commitments will enable faster integration of environmental sustainability, climate change mitigation, and adaptation.

Finally, there is a need to contextualize and harmonize minimum environmental requirements²⁰ across the humanitarian donor community. The establishment of a consistent framework for environmental standards across project proposals will promote consistency and clarity. Streamlining minimum environmental requirements will enhance the sector's capacity to effectively address environmental considerations. It will also alleviate the burden on donors' implementing partners by providing a more cohesive and streamlined approach. This collective effort will reinforce the donor community's commitment to sustainable practices, contributing to the resilience and effectiveness of humanitarian initiatives.

Optimize and mobilize financial resources

Climate action in fragile contexts should be increased. Mercy Corps²¹ highlights the need for risk analysis to be better conceptualized and tracked. It encourages implementing partners to engage and integrate adaptation in their operations. This does not mean transferring it to local implementing partners.

To accelerate action, donors should:

- Contextualize and harmonize their requirements.
- Develop new and more inclusive due diligence frameworks that allow more local organizations to be eligible for funding. Models, such as the START Network's pilot Tiered Due Diligence system,²² exist to support the increase of operational capacity of local actors.
- Develop new funding mechanisms to encourage international NGOs to redefine their role, move away from direct implementation, and support locally led implementation through mentoring and providing technical and operational assistance.²³
- Ensure that the size of awards is manageable for local actors and establish processes that enable local actors to design and develop programming independently.
- Revisit pool funding mechanism and criteria with the participation of local NGOs.

¹⁵ InterAction. (2024). Effective Humanitarian Responses Require Collaborative Environmental Management. InterAction.

¹⁶ Environment & Climate in HRP & HNO analysis | Shelter Cluster.

¹⁷ IFRC. (2023). A Guide to Climate-Smart Programmes and Humanitarian Operations. IFRC. <https://www.ifrc.org/sites/default/files/2023-08/Red-Cross-Red-Crescent-Guide-to-Climate-Smart-Programmes.pdf>

¹⁸ IASC. (nd). The Grand Bargain (Official website). <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/content/grand-bargain-hosted-iasc> and IASC. (nd). Grand Bargain 2.0 Caucuses. <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/group/grand-bargain-20-caucuses>

¹⁹ <https://www.ghdinitiative.org/ghd/gns/home-page.html>

²⁰ Joint Initiative for Sustainable Humanitarian Assistance Packaging Waste Management and the Climate Action Accelerator. (2023). Operationalizing and Scaling-up Donors' Climate and Environmental Commitments: an analysis of progress, gaps and opportunities. https://climateactionaccelerator.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/CAA_JI_Donor-Mapping-Analysis_Final_compressed.pdf

²¹ Mercy Corps. (2023). Overcoming the Fragility Barrier: Policy Solutions for Unlocking Climate Finance in Fragile States. Mercy Corps. <https://www.mercycorps.org/sites/default/files/2023-10/Overcoming-the-Fragility-Barrier-Policy-Paper-10232023.pdf>

²² Start Network (nd). Due Diligence. <https://startnetwork.org/about/governance-and-assurance/due-diligence>

²³ CRS. (nd). Local Leadership in Humanitarian Response and Development Assistance. https://ics.crs.org/node/909-LL%2520paper_.pdf

ANNEX. TOOLS AND GUIDANCE FOR INCLUDING ENVIRONMENTAL CONSIDERATIONS IN HUMANITARIAN PROGRAMMING

Checklist for integrating energy in the humanitarian program cycle (Global Food Security Cluster)

Builds on experiences with the implementation of Safe Access to Fuel and Energy (SAFE) and SAFE-related projects to guide the Cluster Coordination team and partners on how to integrate energy in all phases of the humanitarian program cycle. Steps are outlined for each HPC.

<https://ehaconnect.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2018/11/Checklist-Integrating-Energy-FAO-April-2015.pdf>

Clean Fleet Toolkit (Fleet Forum)

A tool designed to support analysis on greenhouse gas emissions from various vehicles offering strategies for their reduction and optimizations of costs.

<https://cleanfleet.fleetforum.org/#/home>

Climate and Environment Action Compendium (ICVA)

Consolidates existing resources, guidance, and tools related to resilience, risk analysis, adaptation, environmental sustainability, nature-based solutions, mitigation, and more. The compendium categorizes resources by specific topics and keywords for easy access.

<https://www.icvanetwork.org/resource/climate-and-environment-action-compendium/>

The Climate and Environment Charter for Humanitarian Organizations (ICRC 2021)

It is a guiding document that outlines seven commitments for humanitarian organizations to address the impact of climate change and environmental crises.

<https://blogs.icrc.org/law-and-policy/2022/05/12/climate-environment-charter-humanitarian/>

Environment Marker

A tool for tracking a project's expected impact on the environment and whether recommended actions have been undertaken. Each humanitarian project should identify its potential impact on the local environment and address it in a manner tailored to the specific country. The tool helps organizations to minimize any negative impacts of a humanitarian project on the local environment.

<https://eectentre.org/resources/un-environment-ocha-joint-unit-environment-marker/>

Environment Marker Sector Guidance

This guidance accompanies the [Environment Marker](#) and gives specific guidance on mitigation measures for activities in “B”-coded projects (medium environmental impact).

<https://resources.eecentre.org/resources/environment-marker-sector-guidance/>

Framework for environmental management in assistance programs

This document aims to define environmental issues in the context of ICRC’s operations. It also aims to provide useful and practical guidance to Assistance delegates and national staff on two levels:

1. how to understand the relationship between Assistance activities and the environment
2. how to continue to develop an environmentally alert mindset and to enable environmental issues to be systematically integrated into the balance of factors that need to be considered to produce an efficient, effective, and rapid ICRC response

<https://www.icrc.org/en/doc/assets/files/review/2010/irrc-879-environmental-management.pdf>

Multi-hazard risk management (IFRC)

A roadmap providing recommendations on growing chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear (CBRN) risks and include CBRN risk management into a multi-hazard approach.

<https://www.ifrc.org/document/technological-and-biological-hazard-preparedness-background-information>

<https://www.ifrc.org/document/technological-and-biological-hazard-preparedness-roadmap>

NEAT+ tool

The NEAT+ tool assesses the current sensitivity of the crisis-affected environment, highlighting any underlying risks and vulnerabilities to the environment and affected communities. NEAT+ also identifies potential activity related to environmental risks posed by humanitarian relief and recovery projects. A set of mitigation measures and suggestions for further resources and tools available allows users to effectively prioritize areas of concern.

<https://resources.eecentre.org/resources/neat/>

Quick guides on how humanitarian action can minimize environmental impacts (UNEP)

The ‘Quick guides’ contain key guidance on environmental issues relevant to six sectors (Food Security and Agriculture Sector, Basic Needs Sector, Health Sector, Education Sector, Protection Sector, and Livelihood Sector) of the humanitarian response to population displacement. They underscore the opportunities to minimize negative environmental impacts during humanitarian action.

<https://www.unep.org/topics/disasters-and-conflicts/response-and-recovery/environmental-sustainability-humanitarian>

Rental assistance guide (IFRC)

A step-by-step guide for how to plan, design, and implement a successful rental assistance program. Examples and tools have also been included to practically illustrate and support successful program delivery.

<https://www.ifrc.org/document/rental-assistance-guide>

SPHERE—Thematic Sheet: Reducing Environment Impact in Humanitarian Response

Supplements the Sphere Handbook by suggesting how humanitarian actors can preserve and restore the environment as an integral part of overall humanitarian response and recovery activities.

<https://spherestandards.org/wp-content/uploads/Sphere-thematic-sheet-environment-EN.pdf>

Urban action kit (IFRC)

A quick-start, low-cost, do-it-yourself guide to urban resilience activities that will increase a community-based organization's visibility and engagement on urban issues. Activities in the Kit require little to no funding, are short-term engagements, and use existing networks and skills.

<https://www.ifrc.org/document/urban-action-kit>

Urban reconstruction handbook (IFRC)

Guidance on sustainable reconstruction in urban areas, primarily for field practitioners who are planning and implementing housing reconstruction programs in urban areas.

<https://www.ifrc.org/document/urban-reconstruction-handbook>

Environmental Checklist for Shelter Response Global Shelter Cluster

A checklist to guide the shelter coordination team, program managers, and field staff through the steps required to ensure that environmental considerations are integrated into humanitarian shelter programs.

<https://sheltercluster.org/shelter-environment-technical-working-group/documents/environmental-checklist-shelter-response-v15>

(InterAction 2020) InterAction NGO Climate Compact

It is a commitment spearheaded by InterAction to tackle climate change and advance environmental sustainability. It outlines four key areas of commitment for our almost 100 signatory organizations.

<https://www.interaction.org/blog/unveiling-of-the-ngo-climate-compact-2-0/>

