

ENVIRONMENT AND HUMANITARIAN ACTION

Country Study Afghanistan



JOINT UNEP/OCHA ENVIRONMENT UNIT

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Cover photo: Protected areas in Afghanistan (Credit: UNEP)

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The Joint UNEP/OCHA Environment Unit (JEU) assists Member States in preparing for and responding to environmental emergencies by coordinating international efforts and mobilizing partners to aid affected countries requesting assistance. By pairing the environmental expertise of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the humanitarian response network coordinated by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), the JEU ensures an integrated approach in responding to environmental emergencies. The Environmental Emergencies Centre (EEC) (www.eecentre.org) is an online tool designed to build the capacity of national responders to environmental emergencies developed by the JEU.

Executive Summary

The Afghanistan Environment and Humanitarian Action (EHA) country-level study is one in a series of studies undertaken by the Joint UNEP/OCHA Environment Unit (JEU) in 2015 that assesses the extent to which environmental concerns have been mainstreamed in humanitarian action. The study provides guidance and advice to humanitarian actors on how to improve environmental mainstreaming in a protracted crisis. In June 2015, OCHA and UNEP undertook a two week mission to Afghanistan to better understand environmental mainstreaming in a range of contexts, including: conflict and natural disaster related internal displacement, Pakistani refugees in camps and host communities, and Afghan refugees in return and resettlement programmes. In addition, the study analysed the extent to which environmental concerns have been integrated into the Humanitarian Programme Cycle, particularly through the Environment Marker.

The study indicates that while there is generally a high level of awareness of the need to support environmental mainstreaming, the majority of humanitarian actors require context specific practical guidance to ensure integration takes place. The conflict, related mass population movements, and ongoing relief and recovery efforts have all contributed to environmental degradation in Afghanistan (eg. diminishing groundwater resources and deforestation). While some humanitarian clusters have succeeded in taking clear steps towards more environmentally sensitive approaches on paper (eg. WASH, Shelter, and Health), ensuring their quality and impact is hampered by security constraints and capacity to monitor programmes. While individual donors in Afghanistan do not apply environmental screening of proposals, there is support for Common Humanitarian Fund (CHF) application of the Environment Marker and growing recognition that inclusion of environment considerations contributes to disaster risk reduction and resilience in Afghanistan.

Five important factors to further strengthen environmental mainstreaming in protracted crisis were identified in Afghanistan:

Know the environmental context: Context-specific guidance which takes into consideration the environment and natural resource needs of affected communities better informs response operations. Humanitarian actors are responding across Afghanistan to a variety of needs of people with differing legal status (refugees and IDPs in informal and formal settlements) in a range of ecological settings. Simply providing generic global guidance on environmental mainstreaming, which has not been contextualised to the situation on the ground, is insufficient, particularly in countries where humanitarian action is likely for years to come.

Engage national and local environmental expertise: A wealth of local knowledge on environment and natural resource issues exists in local and national environmental institutions and is best placed to inform humanitarian action. Greater UNEP and National Environmental Protection Agency (NEPA) involvement in emergency preparedness and response processes of the Humanitarian Country Team (HCT) and the Afghanistan National Disaster Management Authority (ANDMA) is an effective means to ensure environmental considerations are better covered.

More thorough environmental assessment will better inform humanitarian response: Humanitarian response informed by assessments that include environmental impact considerations and the resource needs of the affected population can help save money, avoid delays and strengthen long-term resilience of affected populations. A range of tools are available that should increasingly be applied in humanitarian settings including the Flash Environmental Assessment Tool (FEAT), Rapid Environmental Assessment (REA), and project based environmental impact assessment. The objective of humanitarian action is to save lives, alleviate suffering and maintain human dignity during and after disasters. However, poorly located and designed settlements supported by humanitarian actors have had negative consequences on the health, education, livelihoods and protection of the very people it was meant to serve.

Incorporate energy considerations into emergency preparedness and response: In protracted crisis apply global best practice and tools in regard to energy supply. The medium and long-term nature of displacement in Afghanistan warrants development of an energy strategy to improve access to household fuel and lighting using appropriate technologies and renewable energy.

Consistent integration of environmental considerations into funding decisions: The majority of donors in Afghanistan do not take into consideration environmental impacts of funding decisions with the exception of the Common Humanitarian Fund (CHF). In general, agencies have little incentive from donors to incorporate environment into humanitarian operations.

List of acronyms

ARC	Afghan Resilience Consortium
ANDMA	National Disaster Management Authority
ARCS	Afghan Red Crescent Society
AOGs	Armed Opposition Groups
CFS	Cash for Shelter
CHS	Core Humanitarian Standard on Quality and Accountability
Eco DRR	Ecosystem based Disaster Risk Reduction
DFID	UK Department for International Development
CHS	Core Humanitarian Standard on Quality and Accountability
EHA	Environment and Humanitarian Action
ERM	Emergency Response Mechanism
GMS	Grant Management System
HNO	Humanitarian Needs Overview
HCT	Humanitarian Country Team
ICCT	Inter-Cluster Coordination Team
ICCU	Inter-Cluster Coordination Unit
JEU	The Joint UNEP/OCHA Environment Unit
MEW	Ministry of Energy and Water
MRRD	Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development
MRR	Multisector Refugees Response
MAIL	Ministry for Agriculture Irrigation and Livestock
NEPA	National Environmental Protection Agency
NWA	North Waziristan Agency
OCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
REA	Rapid Environmental Assessment
SAFE	Safe Access to Fuel and Energy
SSAR	Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees
UNEP	United Nations Environment Programme
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

1. Background and context

The Core Humanitarian Standard on Quality and Accountability (CHS) sets out Nine Commitments for organisations and individuals involved in humanitarian response. The third commitment seeks to ensure that *“Communities and people affected by crisis are not negatively affected and are more prepared, resilient and less at-risk as a result of humanitarian action”*. A key action listed under this commitment is to *“identify and act upon potential or actual unintended negative effects in a timely and systematic manner, including in the areas of [...] the environment”*

Impacts from disasters and armed conflict frequently lead to environmental damage. The impact of relief and recovery operations may also cause unintended further environmental damage, exacerbating poor pre-disaster and pre-conflict environmental conditions, jeopardising longer term recovery efforts and development goals. Environmental information and analysis of the disaster context along with analysis of the impacts of conflict on natural resources and their potential role in conflict resolution and peacebuilding are critical to accountable humanitarian action. Moreover, in protracted crisis and complex humanitarian emergencies, introducing environmental resilience principles in the early phases of an emergency and sustaining them throughout the transition period can greatly contribute to peace and reduce vulnerabilities.

Since the 2005 Humanitarian Reform, “environment” has been identified as a priority cross-cutting issue by humanitarian actors. The study “Environment and Humanitarian Action: Increasing Effectiveness, Sustainability and Accountability” published in August 2014, called for the need for evidence-based advocacy. With financial support from the Government of Finland, the JEU responded to this call and has undertaken a number of country-level studies to explore the level of environment mainstreaming in selected humanitarian crises.

Afghanistan is characterized by a complex nexus between conflict risks and natural hazards. As one of the most acute complex humanitarian emergencies and protracted crises in the world, Afghanistan has been selected for the present study on the basis of the activation of the cluster system, the Common Humanitarian Fund, the Environment Marker, and UNEP and OCHA presence.

1.1 Objectives and scope

The study’s overall objective is to provide an overview of environmental considerations that have been incorporated into humanitarian action. The study is based on a desk review and the findings of a JEU mission to Afghanistan in June 2015 with the following objectives:

1. Assess the extent to which environmental concerns have been taken into consideration throughout the Humanitarian Programme Cycle by clusters coordinators and partners, particularly through the Environment Marker, and assess the level of awareness of stakeholders of the environment and humanitarian action nexus;
2. Identify best practices, lessons learned, and country specific measures to strengthen environmental mainstreaming in Afghanistan.

The scope of the research covers ongoing humanitarian response in a range of contexts related to the conflict (IDPs, resettlement, refugees) and recent natural disasters. Particular attention was given to the 2015 Humanitarian Programme Cycle and the application of the Environment Marker. Information was gathered through key stakeholder interviews and a workshop organized in Kabul. Findings of the JEU Mission were complemented by a desk review of reports and key humanitarian planning tools.

1.2 Environment and humanitarian context of Afghanistan

Afghanistan has been in a situation of protracted conflict for almost thirty five years and as a result is facing a severe environmental crisis. Major environmental issues include depletion of aquifers, air and water pollution, soil degradation, deforestation, overgrazing, desertification, loss of biodiversity, climate change and urban sprawl into ecologically fragile areas. In addition, the country is frequently affected by earthquakes, flooding, drought, landslides and avalanches. On average 400,000 people are affected by recurrent natural disasters each year and about half of Afghanistan’s 400 districts are hazard prone, worsening the economic situation where 36 per cent of the population live below the poverty line. The climate is dry with a noted increased frequency of drought and unpredictable precipitation patterns.¹

1. Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, National Environmental Protection Agency “Afghanistan Initial National Communication To the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change,” 2012

An estimated 7.5 million people in Afghanistan are in need of humanitarian assistance.² Continued problems stemming from years of armed conflict, population flows and declining international aid packages further stress the country. Returning refugees face protection concerns due to the volatile security situation and difficulties in accessing basic services. The withdrawal of international security forces and a complex economic transition are likely to affect peace, security, humanitarian operations and development in Afghanistan. The 2015 Humanitarian Needs Overview (HNO), identified key humanitarian issues as: conflict resulting in significant death, injury and displacement (over 10,000 civilians killed and injured in 2014³); 1.2 million children acutely malnourished and 2.2 million people severely food insecure; 225,000 Pakistani refugees in need of emergency assistance; and around 4,000 families face winter without adequate shelter.

Armed conflict and natural disasters are the main drivers of displacement in Afghanistan. There are also secondary and tertiary displacements due to insecurity where IDPs initially settled, land disputes and the collapse of livelihood opportunities.

In a joint World Bank and UNHCR study⁴, IDPs reported almost unanimously that they fled their villages of origin mainly as a response to conflict. As of July 2015, the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre⁵ estimates that at least 948,000 people were internally displaced by conflict and violence. The figure includes around 103,000 people newly displaced in the first six months of 2015.

The national authorities outlined four general contexts where the environment and humanitarian nexus needs to be better understood: Refugees and IDPs in informal settlements on forested public land; Pakistani refugees in camps; Afghan refugee returnees settling in Kabul and other towns contributing to urban sprawl; and Afghan refugee returnees formally resettled in new settlements.⁶



Children Play at Sosmaqala IDP Camp in Afghanistan

2. 2015 Humanitarian Response Plan for Afghanistan (Dec 2014)

3. <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/12/19/us-afghanistan-casualties-idUSKBN0JX1ZS20141219>

4. World Bank and UNHCR "Research Study on IDPs in urban settings Afghanistan", May 2011

5. <http://www.internal-displacement.org/south-and-south-east-asia/afghanistan/figures-analysis>

6. Interview with National Environmental Protection Agency (NEPA) staff, June 2015

2. Key findings

This chapter provides an analysis of the extent to which environment as cross-cutting issue within humanitarian action is being mainstreamed and/or integrated into response and elements of the Humanitarian Programme Cycle. It highlights key environmental issues, challenges and obstacles to environmental mainstreaming and best practices in environmental integration.

2.1 Accountability

A number of actors, such as the NEPA, Afghanistan National Disaster Management Authority (ANDMA), OCHA and UNEP have an important role in mainstreaming environment through coordination, provision of technical advice and information sharing. In addition, the humanitarian donor community has a role to play in requiring environmental due diligence of funded projects.

There have been considerable advances over the past 10 years in Afghan environmental regulation that humanitarians need to be fully aware of. The NEPA, created in 2005, is responsible for coordinating and monitoring conservation and rehabilitation of the environment and for the implementation of Environment Law of Afghanistan including oversight of Environmental Impact Assessments. While NEPA has a high level of awareness and broad knowledge of environmental impacts of the conflict, displacement, and humanitarian response, it has limited involvement with the humanitarian community and with key governmental agencies such as ANDMA and the Ministry for Rural Rehabilitation and Development (MRRD) on these issues.

In ANDMA, the principal institution mandated to coordinate all aspects related to disasters, awareness of environment issues in humanitarian action is relatively high based on provincial level discussions with authorities. However, it has not taken practical steps to integrate environment in all phases of disaster management and as a consequence, environmental issues are not consistently addressed in national response. The MRRD, through its provincial networks, supports environmental needs assessments and significant distribution of relief items.

OCHA resumed its operation in Afghanistan in 2009, supporting the coordination of humanitarian assistance in a complex environment which challenges the implementation of humanitarian principles and the ability of aid workers to safely reach people in need. All of these have an impact on prioritising and mainstreaming environment in OCHA's efforts that focus on the coordination and delivery of humanitarian aid.

In the Humanitarian Country Team (HCT), composed of select key humanitarian actors and supported by OCHA, environmental issues are rarely if ever raised.

Environmental regulatory frameworks are in place particularly those that relate to environmental impact assessments. UNEP works closely with NEPA in a number of key areas related to environmental management and regulatory frameworks, and could provide a link to international humanitarian coordination mechanisms. However, based on its mandate, UNEP is not a formal member of the HCT or the Inter-Cluster Coordination Team (ICCT) where contextualised environmental guidance and technical support could be provided.

However, in the UNCT in which UNEP participates, environment issues are discussed at the strategic level with development agencies. At an operational level environmental issues are occasionally raised by Cluster Coordinators during ICCT meetings, however, environment is not systematically discussed and there is no environmental guidance being applied by the OCHA Inter Cluster Coordination Unit (ICCU). The main challenge in addressing environmental issues at the inter-cluster coordination level is the lack of clear guidance adapted to the Afghanistan context. Partners suggested the development of a "tool box" on environmental issues designed to support the work of ICCU and cluster coordinators along with strengthening the engagement of UNEP in the ICCT forum as two of the potential solutions. The ICCU also indicated that the inclusion of a stronger environment component in the OCHA training modules for inter cluster coordinators would greatly help⁷ raise awareness amongst colleagues.

In 2002, UNEP conducted a major post-conflict environmental assessment of the country and has been working with the government and other stakeholders to support sustainable development. UNEP focuses on building environmental resilience and sustainability through, inter alia, supporting ecological approaches to Disaster Risk Reduction (Eco DRR), climate change adaptation, conflict prevention through natural resources management, and environmental management and governance.

UNEP is also part of the Afghan Resilience Consortium (ARC), which aims to provide a coherent response to Afghanistan's vulnerabilities to natural disasters and climate change in light of the country's most disaster-

7. In 2014, information on environment included was included in ICC training and an information sheet for ICCs was also produced for the training as a general resource.

prone provinces, primarily in the North and Central Highlands.

At the request of the UNCT, UNEP developed a report in 2013, “Natural Resources Management and Peacebuilding in Afghanistan”, which provides a contextual background that can support humanitarian actors’ awareness of environment and natural resource concerns. However, in 2015 very few of the humanitarian partners were aware of the complexities of the issues covered in the report. UNEP is not a member of the HCT, but in 2013 supported environmental integration into cluster response through the development of cluster specific environmental messages aimed at raising awareness and promoting environmental sensitive humanitarian action. However, again, just after two years few partners were aware of the material in 2015 which may be a reflection of high turnover international staff in Afghanistan. In addition to reports and previous guidance, in 2014 UNEP Afghanistan provided technical assistance to support the application of the Environment Marker for projects screened under the CHF discussed separately.

Some of the obstacles to environmental mainstreaming are related to lack of good guidance in the hands of humanitarians in part due to limited cooperation between key humanitarian and environment actors in-country.

The HCT lacks good analysis of the environmental context in Afghanistan with the result that emergency preparedness and key strategic and operational products of the HPC do not factor in environmental vulnerabilities and risks. This has an impact at the operational level in the ICC group, where environment issues are rarely discussed and there is a weak understanding of their multisector nature. The absence of context-based guidance on environment and humanitarian action is considered by the majority of humanitarian partners as a major obstacle to environmental mainstreaming.

Donor understanding of environment as a cross-cutting issue varied with some showing a high level of accountability and awareness while others defer responsibility to implementing partners. The importance of integrating environment into humanitarian action is recognized particularly as it contributes to disaster risk reduction and resilience in Afghanistan. However, some donors in Afghanistan see the integration of environment concerns into humanitarian action as costly and not a priority criterion for funding. No donor consulted with during the JEU’s 2015 mission to Afghanistan systematically undertakes an environmental screening of humanitarian projects as a precondition to funding. Competing priorities and funding availability were suggested to be the biggest challenges. Nevertheless donors expressed appreciation for the Environment Marker used as a screening tool by the Common Humanitarian Fund (CHF).



Humanitarian actors are often not aware of the environment and natural resource concerns in Afghanistan

2.2 Cluster specific environmental recommendations

Environmental mainstreaming efforts in the WASH, Emergency Shelter/NFI, and Health Clusters were looked at in greater detail in addition to the Multisector Refugee Response efforts.

2.2.1 WASH Cluster

The Ministry of Energy and Water (MEW) delivers drilling permits for water extraction, a key activity carried out by a number of humanitarian actors with a portion of the funds being provided by the CHF. Until recently drilling permits were not an obligation and there has been limited monitoring and law enforcement. Based on a 2013 ECHO commissioned survey, 35 per cent of the water points in rural areas do not function. Rather than rehabilitating existing water points, development and humanitarian actors have focused on building new water points. However, the construction of new water points often occurs without preliminary assessments even though the depletion of aquifers and water quality has been an issue for decades. Disputes over the allocation of water are the second most commonly cited cause of conflict after land.⁸

In general, the WASH cluster follows SPHERE standards and existing national guidance in the sector provided by MRRD, however, WASH partners recognize a lack of coordination on water extraction activities. Environmental Impact Assessment are rarely carried out prior to drilling and, despite National EIA regulations, there is no enforcement and monitoring by the MRRD.

However, as per MRRD standards and protocols, upon completion of drilling and prior to pump installation, water quality is always checked by the MRRD teams. MRRD participation in WASH Cluster meetings is very limited.

The government of Afghanistan and the international aid community have invested in access to clean drinking water, however, sanitation issues have received far less funding in a country where open defecation is prevalent. WASH partners often focus on the provision of emergency latrines and hygiene kits during response. Emergency latrines are replaced with transitional ones in post emergency scenarios. However, partners have pointed out that, currently, emergency latrines are not always decommissioned (particularly in Khost refugee response) and contamination of drinking-water sources remains a risk.



Children collecting waste at the dumpsite Herat, Afghanistan

8. United Nations Country Team in Afghanistan, "Natural Resources Management and Peace Building in Afghanistan" UNEP, May 2013

Key findings

The following environmental issues were identified in the WASH cluster:

- Emergency latrines are not always decommissioned;
- Environmental assessment are not consistently undertaken by cluster members engaged in well rehabilitation and construction;
- Ground water extraction lacks regulation and monitoring, posing a threat to further depletion of aquifers and quality quality; and
- Short term solutions to water and sanitation issues are frequently being adopted in context with protracted displacement.

An environmental checklist for WASH partners was developed as part of working group on needs assessment. WASH cluster co-lead led the process of developing the context specific guidelines for water, sanitation and hygiene in Afghanistan with the aim to “[...] ensure that programmes in Afghanistan are not contributing to environmental degradation and preserving natural resources for future generations. WASH programme has a strategy to carryout rapid environmental impact assessment of the proposed project area. It is anticipated that these guidelines will provide the framework in which consideration of the environment will be seen as a cross cutting issue and integrated into the project cycle of WASH project.” An accompanying environmental checklist considers impact on trees, wildlife, agriculture, erosion, water resources, flooding, health, etc. The checklist has subsequently been used by the CHF project review committee.



Depletion of aquifers has been exacerbated due to unregulated water source development often times by aid organisations

2.2.2 Health Cluster

The Health Cluster coordinates closely with the WASH cluster, in which a cross-cutting issues working group has been established. The health cluster also benefits from the presence of an Environmental Engineer. The cluster promotes technical standards but applying and monitoring them is problematic. One of the more significant environmental issues facing the health cluster at present is the lack of **national guidance on the disposal of healthcare waste**. While National Guidance is being developed, the Health Cluster Environmental Engineer works on interim recommendations for health care waste management based on the Safe Management of Waste from Health Care Activities (WHO 2014) and builds the capacity of local partners.



Medical waste at Kandahar dumpsite, Afghanistan

2.2.3 Emergency Shelter and Non Food Items (NFI)

The Emergency Shelter NFI cluster established a technical working group to address standards, which took into consideration environmental standards for shelter. The cluster adopted the **Technical Guidelines for Shelter and NFIs Interventions in Afghanistan (2015)** generally based on SPHERE. The Technical Guidelines are mandatory for partners and contain provisions for the protection of the environment during assessment and implementation of cluster activities.

However, due to security, monitoring is problematic in many areas. Key findings based on discussions with major stakeholders include:

- Most emergency shelter materials are reused by affected communities;
- Procurement of material is done locally and informed by the principle of cost-effectiveness,

therefore it does not necessarily take into account environmental concerns such as origin of fuelwood and impacts on deforestation;

- Where Cash for Shelter (CFS) modality applied, environment and disaster risk reduction considerations are integrated into guidance;
- Some NFI kits include solar panels and energy efficient cook stoves;
- Rapid assessment forms used by cluster partners include questions related to water availability and quality and access to energy.

2.2.4 Multisector Refugees Response

In June 2014, military action in North Waziristan, Pakistan, resulted in an exodus of an estimated 1.5 million residents. As of June 2015, as many as 205,113 Pakistani refugees crossed into Khost and neighbouring districts of Afghanistan. Khost hosts 155,000 refugees and Paktika District hosts approximately 51,000 refugees.

A multisector working group for the Refugees Response (MRR) was established. Soon after the influx the Government of Afghanistan allocated land for Gulan refugee camp where over 3,300 refugee families reside. Ongoing protection concerns in Pakistan have resulted in a protracted crisis with families indicating they do not expect to be able to return home for two to three years. As a consequence, while emergency assistance is still required as new families continue to arrive, humanitarian operations should increasingly consider more medium-term assistance that is environmentally appropriate. Some of the key environmental issues to highlight include:

- Potential increase in deforestation around Gulan camp and where refugees are concentrated in host families as a result of winterisation and cooking fuel needs;
- The added stress on forest resources shared between refugee and host communities may cause tension with host communities;
- The source of shelter material and impact on the surrounding environment should be better assessed (this may in turn lead to discussions with local communities and to joint decisions concerning forest management);
- The high number of emergency latrines required raises concerns around timely decommissioning to make room for transitional ones;

- The high number of partners providing WASH services to host communities and refugees in Gulistan camp calls for effective coordination amongst partners to ensure adverse impacts on water resources are minimised, however, few partners reportedly undertake environmental assessments prior to developing water sources;
- Environmental issues are not specifically discussed within the MRR working group responding to the Pakistani refugee influx, however, due to the increased duration of stay environmental impacts are likely to increase;

Deforestation is a major problem in Afghanistan with just 1.5 per cent of the land considered to be forested. The majority of forest cover has been destroyed due to unsustainable agricultural and grazing practices, demand for cooking and heating, as well as illegal timber operations. Rolling out the Safe Access to Fuel and Energy (SAFE) initiative in Khost would likely bring environmental benefits across multiple clusters. A coordinated approach to the provision of fuel and energy for refugees along with a strategy to address access to water and sanitation will help minimize environmental impacts.

Within the Multisector Refugee Response, mine clearing projects identified potential adverse environmental impacts caused by demining activities and used an Environmental Screening Checklist for each minefield (prior to implementation mine clearance projects were screened through the Environment Marker).

Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees (SSAR) includes a reintegration component. Since 2002 more than 5.8 million Afghan refugees have returned to Afghanistan. Though returnee figures decreased over the past six years due to insecurity and the socio-economic situation, the rate of refugee return has increased substantially in the first half of 2015, with 43,695 individuals repatriating compared to 9,323 individuals for the same period in 2014. Of concern from an environmental perspective is: a) rapid urbanization, in part due to returning refugees, has led to increased population density and development of a number of informal settlements around Kabul; and b) the construction of new formal settlements on government allocated land which is often marginal and/or requires sharing resources (eg. water) with nearby communities. Humanitarian and recovery activities serving returnee communities will more effectively support sustainable resettlement if environmental assessments are undertaken on a more regular basis prior to project implementation. The protracted development of the 2007 AliceGhan Project at Barikab of Qarabagh District in Kabul should illustrate the pitfalls of failing to undertake an environmental assessment prior to project implementation. Originally planned to house 1,400 vulnerable returnee families by 2009, the lack of water supply and other infrastructure delayed full realisation of the project until 2015 at a cost to both donors and the residence who struggled to live there for years.



Fuel wood collection Afghanistan

2.3 Overview of the Humanitarian Programme Cycle and the Common Humanitarian Fund

The Humanitarian Programme Cycle (HPC) includes five stages: needs assessment and analysis, strategic planning, resources mobilisation, implementation and monitoring, operational review and evaluation. Preparedness can be considered as a distinct element underpinning the entire cycle and is supported by the IASC Emergency Response Preparedness (ERP) module. A review of key HPC global guidance and tools undertaken in 2013 and 2014 identified key entry points to mainstream environment. The following review in Afghanistan is limited to preparedness, needs assessment and strategic planning.

2.3.1 Emergency Preparedness

Environmental issues do not feature in Emergency Preparedness initiatives in Afghanistan, with the exception of the 2013 contingency plan in which environmental hazards were included in the risk analysis. The ICCU and the clusters engage in preparedness through annual cluster contingency planning exercise. As discussions are underway on the reporting lines of the emergency preparedness working group and its terms of references, there may be room to introduce environmental considerations into the 2016 ERP process, ensuring each of the preparedness actions includes appropriate environmental considerations. National and provincial contingency plans are also important entry points for environmental integration in Afghanistan.

2.3.2 Needs Assessment/Analysis

The 2015 Humanitarian Needs Overview (HNO) analysis identified approximately 7.4 million people to be in need of some form of humanitarian assistance. The HNO does not specifically contain information and analysis of key environmental vulnerabilities in Afghanistan in areas such as water, land and deforestation - which could exacerbate humanitarian needs. In general, the HNO maintains a strong focus on immediate needs but lacks environmental contextual analysis. According to HNO guidance the root causes of the crisis need to be taken into consideration (political instability, conflict, economic conditions, discrimination based on sex, ethnicity, religion, environmental conditions, etc.). When undertaking

joint and inter-sectoral analysis global HNO guidance suggests to consider how environmental factors and other cross-cutting issues affect and might worsen the situation of affected populations.

2.3.3 Response planning

Agencies contributing to the 2015 response plan identified activities totalling \$405 million to assist up to 3.8 million people in need. The HRP priorities aim to ensure resources target direct action to prevent loss of life and reduce preventable morbidity or human suffering caused by conflict or natural disasters. As a result there is no specific mention of environmental concerns or support for more environmentally sensitive activities. However, the HRP mentions support to community resilience a number of times. It builds upon a resilience focused approach, emphasising preparedness, early action and the goal of moving towards full national ownership of response. Of the cluster plans none mention environmental concerns or efforts to mainstream environment.⁹

2.3.4 Resource mobilisation and the Common Humanitarian Fund

The aim of the CHF is to provide predictable and strategic funding to UN agencies and international and local NGOs to ensure timely and appropriate emergency response in Afghanistan. In 2015, the CHF received contributions over USD 38.5 million of which over USD 33.0 million were allocated to humanitarian projects supporting displaced populations affected by disasters and conflict in priority districts of Afghanistan.

The Humanitarian Coordinator (HC) is responsible for the strategic and operational direction of the CHF and is ultimately accountable, while an Advisory Board, comprised of members of the humanitarian community, supports the HC in matters of policy and strategy setting for the CHF. The OCHA Humanitarian Financing Unit (HFU) provides technical support and acts as the managing agent for CHF-funded NGO projects.

9. The only mention of natural resources is in regard to the opportunity to exploit them – Mine Action activities, clearance, education and victim assistance will contribute to the normalisation of civilian life, in particular in relation to exploitation of natural resources and economic development.

The Afghanistan CHF undertakes environmental screening of all projects by applying the Environment Marker from the initial concept note to project implementation and monitoring.

The Environment Marker¹⁰ screening process is comprised of four steps:

1. **Contextualize** the project based on the environmental vulnerabilities of the area
2. **Assess** projects for potential negative environmental impacts, based on identified environmental vulnerabilities
3. **Mitigate** impacts by modifying project design or compensating for negative impacts
4. **Enhance** environmental benefits in the project

In 2014, UNEP provided technical expertise to support the screening process. In 2015 the CHF aimed to strengthen internal capacity to better take into consideration cross-cutting issues such as gender and the environment. However, even though the Environment Marker is applied in the screening process, monitoring its impact on the ground is much more difficult. Access constraints and the rapidity of monitoring efforts limits the extent to which planned environmental interventions and considerations can be monitored in CHF funded projects. In addition, environment is not yet integrated into the monitoring framework for CHF funded projects.

CHF partners highlighted a number of challenges implementing the Environment Marker, including: Limited space dedicated to environmental issues in the grant format provided by CHF; the online Grant Management System (GMS) logframe has no reference to environment; donor pressure for a quick response to humanitarian needs, hence, there is no time to consider environmental issues. CHF partners were in general agreement that environment is not a priority in emergency response; and the costs of minimizing environmental impacts are not included in funding decisions. The CHF funded a number of projects in Khost (approximately \$9.0 million) some of which utilise significant natural resources and could impact environmental degradation if proper assessment and monitoring are not put in place (new

wells, shelter material, and fuelwood). It is important that funding is allocated and monitoring takes place to ensure that principles of environmental sustainability are upheld. For example, prior to developing a new water source WASH partners could explicitly indicate in proposals that an environmental assessment of water resources will be undertaken, and then be required to provide supporting documentation for monitoring purposes. Unfortunately, partners confirmed that environmental assessments are not carried out in emergency situations even when there is sufficient time and resources.

A harmonised approach amongst donors on environment as a priority cross-cutting issue would help strengthen resilience grounded humanitarian action in Afghanistan. Currently the CHF submissions undergo an environmental screening (Environment Marker), however, Emergency Response Mechanism (ERM) funded by ECHO does not make a similar provision. Some donors are aware of and recognise internal agency-specific environmental guidance while others are not sure if it exists.

2.3.5 Monitoring

Conflict continues to have a negative impact on humanitarian support to conflict-affected communities and the safety of aid workers. As a result effective monitoring of affected population needs and the implementation of humanitarian projects to address them remains a challenge. Within the monitoring frameworks environmental issues are given low priority in general.

10. Each project is marked according to its environmental impacts with "A" indicating a neutral impact on the environment, "B" indicating medium environmental impact without mitigation and "C" indicating major environmental impact without mitigation. A "+" is then added to each code to indicate the measures taken to minimize environmental impacts or to enhance environmental sustainability.

3. Conclusions and recommendations

The humanitarian community in Afghanistan faces considerable challenges in responding to conflict and disaster-induced displacement and returning refugees. Security concerns greatly affect the ability of humanitarian partners to effectively assess and monitor needs and impacts of the response. As the international community is preparing the ground for transition, with donor funding shrinking and the gradual handing over of key functions to national authorities, the Government of Afghanistan struggles to enforce rule of law and ensure security. In this context, environment and natural resource considerations in humanitarian action are either not prioritised or frequently overlooked due to the competing demand to deliver life-saving assistance.

As a result, the environment and natural resource based livelihoods are greatly affected by conflict, humanitarian crisis and natural disasters. Water and forests are amongst the most vulnerable resources in Afghanistan impacted by humanitarian action. The study found that mainstreaming of environment into humanitarian action in Afghanistan is very limited. Attempts to integrate environment into the project cycle of some clusters is evident (eg. WASH environment checklist), however, monitoring of application of standards is hampered by insecurity. WASH, Health and Shelter clusters made practical steps to sensitize partners to environmental issues. The WASH cluster developed an environmental checklist for WASH projects, which is also used by the CHF. However, there are considerable challenges in monitoring the implementation of the tool by partners. WASH partners recognized that Rapid Environmental Assessment is rarely carried out.

Clusters resourced with dedicated environment staff were also able to make some gains mainstreaming environment. For example, the Health cluster benefits from the presence of an environmental engineer sensitising partners on appropriate medical waste management by providing context-informed guidance based on the latest WHO guidelines. The Shelter cluster applies Technical Guidelines for Shelter and NFIs which contains environmental provisions. The Shelter winterization program adopts Cash for Fuel approach which minimizes the cutting of trees. However, the Multisector Refugees Response partners attending to the critical needs of refugees are less sensitized on environmental issues.

In general there is a high level of awareness amongst national and international humanitarian partners of environmental issues in Afghanistan, however, due to existing priorities there is limited effort to translate this into action. At the same time, within the humanitarian coordination structure, engagement of local environmental expertise and institutions is limited to the CHF application of the Environment Marker. More systematic and regular engagement of key environment institutions within the international humanitarian structure will contribute to bridging the gap between development and humanitarian actors and strengthening the resilience considerations in humanitarian action.

The lack of a coherent approach by the donors to integrate environmental sustainability and resilience principles into humanitarian action is greatly constrained.

In general, humanitarian donors lack a harmonized approach to ensure environmental issues are addressed in funded projects. While the CHF applies the Environment Marker as a screening tool other pooled funds (such as the Emergency Response Mechanism) make no similar provision. There is an absence of earmarked funding for the integration of environmental issues in humanitarian projects.



Solar street and clean energy solutions Afghanistan

Based on the study of environment and humanitarian action in Afghanistan, five important lessons to strengthen environmental mainstreaming were identified:

1. Know the environmental context.

Context-specific guidance which takes into consideration the environment and natural resource needs of affected communities will better inform response operations. Humanitarian actors are responding across the Afghanistan to a variety of needs of people with differing legal status (refugees and IDPs in informal and formal settlements) in a range of ecological settings. UNEP and appropriate national authorities are well placed to work with key humanitarian partners to develop and provide such guidance to the HCT, inter cluster coordination partners, and donors in the form of a briefing report. Simply providing generic global guidance on environmental mainstreaming, which has not been contextualised to the situation on the ground, is insufficient, particularly in countries where humanitarian action is likely for years to come.

2. Engage national and local environmental expertise.

A wealth of local knowledge on environment and natural resource issues exists in local and national environmental institutions and is best placed to inform humanitarian action. Greater UNEP and NEPA involvement in emergency preparedness and response processes of OCHA and ANDMA and MRRD is an effective means to ensure environmental considerations are better covered. The HCT should consider engaging environmental expertise in each element of the Humanitarian Programme Cycle to ensure a more comprehensive needs analysis and humanitarian response plan which takes into greater consideration natural resource dependent livelihoods and the environment.

3. Environmental assessments inform response.

Humanitarian response informed by assessments that include environmental impact considerations and the resource needs of the affected population can help save money, avoid delays and strengthen the resilience of affected populations.

A range of tools are available that should increasingly be applied in humanitarian settings, including: the Flash Environmental Assessment Tool (FEAT); Rapid Environmental Assessment (REA); and project based environmental impact assessment.

The objective of humanitarian action is to save lives, alleviate suffering and maintain human dignity during and after disasters. Humanitarian actors should recognise undertaking environmental assessments will contribute to the sustainability of programmes being implemented, particularly in the WASH, Shelter, food and Health clusters. Unfortunately, the lack of environmental assessments has led to poorly designed projects that have compromised the health, education, and protection of the very people they were meant to serve (eg. unregulated development of water resources, poorly designed resettlement schemes).

4. Incorporate energy considerations into emergency preparedness and response.

In protracted crisis, global best practice and tools should be applied in regard to energy supply. The medium and long-term nature of displacement in Afghanistan warrants development of an energy strategy to improve access to household fuel and lighting using appropriate technologies and renewable energy. The Pakistani refugee camps in Khost present humanitarian partners with an opportunity to address lighting, heating and cooking needs in a more sustainable manner. Low cost innovative solutions with the private sector and others could then be replicated in other locations where there are sizable displaced populations.

5. Consistent integration of environmental considerations into funding decisions.

The majority of donors in Afghanistan do not take into consideration environmental impacts of funding decisions with the exception of the Common Humanitarian Fund (CHF). In general, agencies have little incentive from donors to incorporate environment into humanitarian operations. The application of the Environment Marker can be improved if: the tool is better integrated into global CHF processes, in-country monitoring tools and access improve, and donors in general place greater emphasis on the importance of natural resource and environmental considerations. If these are taken up, environment mainstreaming has a better chance of going beyond the proposal phase of CHF funded projects.

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Water is a crucial resource in Afghanistan. WASH cluster partners developed an environmental checklist for programmes in an effort to minimise detrimental impacts on scarce natural resources.

www.unocha.org/unesp

www.eecentre.org

www.humanitarianresponse.info/environment



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