



APCEL Climate Change Adaptation Platform

Climate Change Adaptation: Beyond Greening Humanitarian Response

by

Margareth Sembiring and Alistair D. B. Cook

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INTRODUCTION

Humanitarian response traditionally provides immediate relief and protection to a population affected by conflict and/or natural disaster. While humanitarian action stays true to its primary mandate, environment considerations in general, and specifically climate change adaptation, have yet to take root and be integrated into humanitarian action frameworks. The worrying trend of increasing frequency and severity of climate-induced disaster events in recent years provides all the more reason for humanitarian response to be more sensitive and attentive to climate change adaptation efforts. After all, the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030 calls for “enhancing disaster preparedness for effective response and to “Build Back Better” in recovery, rehabilitation and reconstruction”.³ This sets the tone for humanitarian action to look beyond short-term relief and take an active role in building the climate resilience of the affected communities.

However, the importance of mainstreaming the environment as an integral part of humanitarian action for longer term sustainability and more secure settings for affected populations remains underappreciated. Although the need to consider environment is largely uncontested among humanitarian actors, implementation remains elusive. Notable efforts to push the environment agenda into humanitarian work have been jointly made by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). Established in 1994, the Joint Environmental Unit (JEU) works not only in the areas of emergency response and emergency preparedness, but also in integrating environment into humanitarian action. Thus far, however, the JEU has focused primarily on assessing environmental impacts, such as the unintended release of hazardous substances, in the immediate aftermath of disaster events. The mainstreaming of environment in humanitarian response has yet to gain as much traction although relevant initiatives have been made in Sudan and the Philippines. In both countries, Environmental Field Advisers were specifically deployed to assist local OCHA offices to craft environmentally-resilient humanitarian action.

FROM RESPONSE TO DEVELOPMENT

One of the possible factors that explains the slow uptake of environment agenda within humanitarian operation is the longstanding bifurcated debate on the balance between short-term humanitarian response and longer term development. Environment concerns in general

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³ United Nations, 2015, Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015 – 2030 (Geneva: UNSIDR), available: <http://www.unisdr.org/we/inform/publications/43291> last visited 22/6/17.

and climate change adaptation in particular, are usually perceived to have more relevance to the latter and have thus far fallen mostly within the realm of a national government's responsibilities.

Such a paradigm needs to change as response and reconstruction following a disaster event will lay the ground for the future life and development of the affected community. While Build Back Better as being called for in the Sendai Framework clearly espouses this idea, Build Back Greener can seamlessly contribute to this framework by strengthening community resilience through the incorporation of environmental considerations, and future climate change impacts, in humanitarian action. Build Back Greener can be the pathway for climate change adaptation measures to be planted in humanitarian response, and it further adds weight to the Do No Harm commitment that binds the Humanitarian Principles together.

Working on greening humanitarian response is the first step towards Building Back Greener. It is loosely defined as conducting humanitarian response in environmentally-friendly manner by being mindful of the environmental repercussions of relief efforts. This low-hanging fruit approach includes, among others, ensuring waste generated from humanitarian response does not pollute the environment; and choosing materials with a lower carbon footprint to reconstruct damaged buildings, has garnered considerable attention from various humanitarian actors. The greening humanitarian response is part of the JEU's online course materials that aims to sensitise the wider humanitarian community of Greening Humanitarian Response.

More recently, the environmentally-friendly approach has begun to find its application in energy provision to the affected population. In 2015, a Chatham House report titled *Heat, Light and Power for Refugees: Saving Lives, Reducing Costs* found that (1) energy use by displaced people is economically, environmentally and socially unsustainable, and women and children bear the greatest costs; (2) improving access to cleaner and more modern energy solutions reduces costs, cuts emissions and saves lives; (3) barriers to change are not technological but institutional, operational and political; and (4) doing things differently can bring significant benefits for host communities.⁴ A real implementation of this approach was evidenced in the aftermath of Typhoon Haiyan where the Energy Research Institute at Nanyang Technological University (ERI@N) developed a project to provide renewable energy to typhoon-affected communities. The project found that communities were able to charge mobile telephones, power lights and heat water with solar power packs designed for the typhoon-affected community setting. Subsequently the ERI@N project has identified renewable energy as a potential new addition to family packs as part of the humanitarian response effort.⁵

⁴ Glada Lahn and Owen Grafham, 2015, *Heat, Light and Power for Refugees: Saving Lives, Reducing Costs*, London: Chatham House. Available: <https://www.chathamhouse.org/publication/heat-light-and-power-refugees-saving-lives-reducing-costs> last visited 22/6/17.

⁵ Michael Lochinvar Abundo, 2017, 'Energy in Post-Disaster Scenarios: Insights on Appropriate Technologies and Initiatives', in Ennio Picucci and Alistair D. B. Cook (eds) *Humanitarian Technology Survey*, Report, Singapore: RSIS Centre for NTS Studies), pp. 20 – 22.

CHALLENGES AND WAY FORWARD

To ensure a smooth transition from short-term relief to long-term development that will enable a climate-sensitive humanitarian response and climate-resilience building, a mind-set shift needs to take place within the overall humanitarian system. In its report published in 2014, the JEU highlights that the environment element has to be systematically integrated into the policy, practice, and funding of humanitarian action.⁶

Such thinking, however, is still absent in Southeast Asia. In the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), while investment in regional visions to implement plans of action for the forthcoming decade are in line with global commitments, the ASEAN Vision 2025 on Disaster Management does not incorporate specific environment and climate change adaptation considerations within it as it focuses on institutionalisation and communications, financing and resource mobilisation; and partnerships and innovations. The ASEAN Vision 2025 on Disaster Management does make broad calls for a fresh mandate to be granted to the Secretary-General to champion disaster risk reduction and climate change adaptation across the ASEAN economic, socio-cultural and political-security communities;⁷ the need to shift towards a more comprehensive disaster management financing, inclusive of adaptation, over the subsequent ten years⁸; and for ASEAN to provide a coherent link between different aspects of disaster management and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.⁹ Additionally, while the ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response (AADMER) Work Programme 2016–2020¹⁰ recognises the urgency of integrating climate change adaptation and disaster risk reduction and tasks National Disaster Management Office to play the lead role, the context seems to be within a pre-disaster setting and is yet to extend to a humanitarian response situation.

Being located in a disaster-prone region, ASEAN member states have experienced multiple major-scale disaster events such as the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, the 2008 Cyclone Nargis and the 2013 Typhoon Haiyan, among others. Despite the need to assist each other in a disaster situation which was first recognised in the ASEAN Declaration on Mutual Assistance on Natural Disasters 1976,¹¹ ASEAN's eventual collective 'One ASEAN One response' approach embodied in the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on Disaster Management (AHA Centre) is considerably a much more recent phenomenon. The AHA Centre was established in 2011, and its existence is mandated in the AADMER that came into force in 2009. A Disaster Emergency Logistic System was instituted in the Royal Malaysian Air Force Base in Subang in 2012 to support the AHA Centre's operations. Its response in Typhoon Haiyan in 2013 provided the first litmus test of its operational

⁶ Joint UNEP/OCHA Environment Unit, 2014, 'Environment and Humanitarian Action: Increasing Effectiveness, Sustainability and Accountability', Geneva: Switzerland.

⁷ ASEAN, 2015, ASEAN Vision 2025 on Disaster Management, Jakarta, Indonesia: ASEAN Secretariat, p.9.

⁸ ASEAN, 2015, ASEAN Vision 2025 on Disaster Management, Jakarta, Indonesia: ASEAN Secretariat, p.13.

⁹ ASEAN, 2015, ASEAN Vision 2025 on Disaster Management, Jakarta, Indonesia: ASEAN Secretariat, p.5.

¹⁰ ASEAN, 2016, AADMER Work Programme 2016-2020, Jakarta, Indonesia: ASEAN Secretariat, p.68.

¹¹ "The Role of ASEAN in Disaster Management: Legal Framework and Case Study of Typhoon Haiyan/Yolanda" (with R.L.Eisma-Osorio), in K.L.Koh (Editor-in Chief), I. Kelman, R.Kibugi & R.L.Eisma-Osorio (eds), *Adaptation to Climate Change: ASEAN and Comparative Experiences*, pp 455-505 (World Scientific: 2015).

effectiveness and efficiency. In a post-operation review, it was noted that “ASEAN was not fully capable of handling Haiyan.”¹²

Given that ASEAN’s collective response is still being scaled up, greening humanitarian action is still in its infancy. In the face of the core humanitarian need to provide immediate relief and protection to an affected community, environmental concerns can easily come second or third in priority. While efforts to greening humanitarian response are underway, it is important not to lose sight of the ultimate one-step-ahead climate-sensitive Build Back Greener goal. Adapting to climate change is more challenging than greening initiatives as the former needs to take account of future climate events in its bid to build preparedness and resilience. Against this backdrop, engagement with the scientific community becomes critical. As science and technology are often able to offer solutions to projected climate scenarios, dialogues between scientists and humanitarian actors will enable the formulation of climate-sensitive humanitarian response strategies and approaches. This way, humanitarian response will move beyond greening its operations to being the first actors in building climate resilience in the aftermath of disasters.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 477.