

Adapting humanitarian aid to the climate emergency

Seven recommendations

Stephanie Sodero and Bertrand Taithe

Brief Summary:

This policy brief summarises [seven recommendations](#) that emerged from a research project undertaken by the Humanitarian and Conflict Response Institute (University of Manchester), UK-Med, and Save the Children-UK, supported by the UK Disasters Emergency Committee, on how humanitarian aid needs to adapt to the climate emergency. The resulting recommendations are based on analysis of policy documents and peer-reviewed literature, as well as interviews with and surveys of aid workers operating in various countries, sectors, and organisations. The seven recommendations are, in brief, **1.** Closing the information gap, **2.** Planning for scale, **3.** Acting early, **4.** Resourcing that's fit for purpose, **5.** Collaborating beyond sectors and borders, **6.** Getting the humanitarian house in order, and **7.** Speaking up. For each recommendation, we provide examples of successful initiatives that can be scaled-up. These interrelated recommendations are a starting point for a broader galvanising platform to transform humanitarian aid. Based on these findings, this brief offers guiding principles for humanitarian organisations, public and private donors, and national and international policy makers in creating a humanitarian system equipped to deal with the climate emergency.

A graphic novella summarising these seven recommendations is available [here](#).

This policy brief:

- Outlines current and projected impact of climate change on humanitarian aid delivery;
- Describes seven recommendations for adapting humanitarian aid to the climate emergency;
- Provides concrete examples of ongoing initiatives that can be scaled-up for each recommendation;
- Emphasizes that these recommendations are a starting point for transforming humanitarian aid.

Context

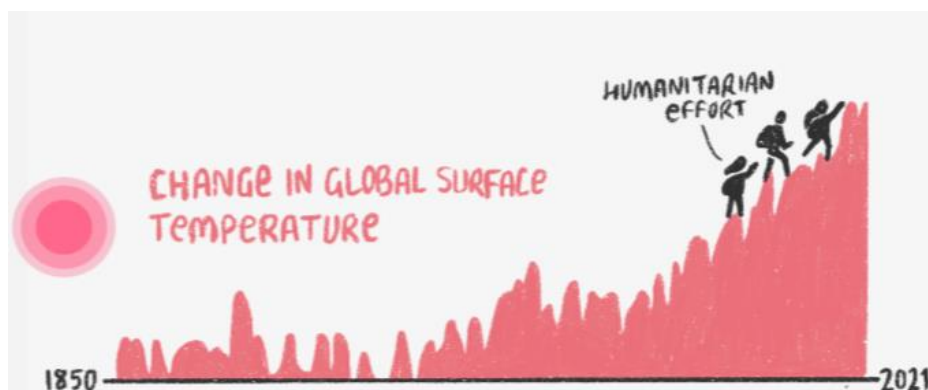
Aid workers warn that the world is unprepared for the escalating crisis. The effects of climate change are already felt at 1.1C of global heating. Even if emissions are reduced and warming is limited to 1.5C, extreme weather events will continue to hit harder, more frequently, and for longer. As a result, increasing numbers of people will be left without healthcare, shelter, and food. How can the aid system improve and what are the barriers to change? Our project examines the experiences of aid workers to present recommendations for humanitarian organisations, public and private donors, and national and international policy makers.

In its [Sixth Assessment Report](#) (2021), the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change states that human activity is ‘unequivocally’ warming the atmosphere, ocean, and land, and evidence of changes in extremes such as heatwaves, heavy precipitation, droughts and tropical cyclones strengthened since the Fifth Assessment Report (2014).

With an increase of at least 1.5C unavoidable, the humanitarian sector needs to adapt quickly to respond to the increase in extreme weather and disasters. This decade is the final opportunity for humanity to avoid catastrophic levels of global heating.

New Reality of Humanitarian Operations

Aid workers provided examples of how the frequency, severity, location, and impact of disasters are changing, with dramatic impacts on community well-being. For aid workers, the climate emergency is increasingly a consideration in daily operations. Our research found that they are witnessing an overall change in the patterns of



*Demand for humanitarian response will increase with global heating
Image: Dwarka Nath Sinha*

environmental hazard occurrence leading to disaster.

This observation of a changing hazard landscape is the most pronounced in humanitarian professionals with 15 to 20 years experience. They spoke about specific disasters as ‘wake up calls’ to the reality of the climate emergency, citing Cyclone Idai as a clear example as it struck a region of eastern Africa unused to preparing for tropical cyclones. Likewise, fast and slow onset disasters exacerbate ongoing community and regional tensions, heightening existing and introducing new conflicts.

The climate emergency is a ‘threat multiplier,’ exacerbating existing societal inequalities, harming economies and livelihoods, and eroding living conditions and coping capacities in vulnerable contexts. Many people are living in ‘multi-hazard environments,’ experiencing continual peaks of crises including conflict, disasters, and disease outbreaks.

Methods

The ‘*Sounding the Siren*’ study co-authored by the Humanitarian and Conflict Response Institute (University of Manchester), UK-Med, and Save the Children-UK asked humanitarian aid workers: how do we prepare the aid system for the climate emergency? These recommendations are based on analysis of policy and peer-reviewed

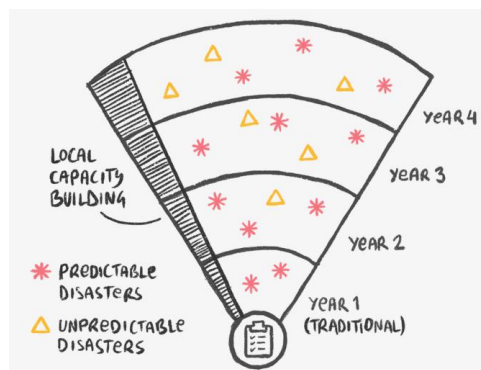
literature, as well as interviews (n32) with and surveys (n 25) of aid workers operating in diverse countries, sectors, and organisations. The findings were validated by aid workers who did not participate in the research.

Recommendations

1. Closing the information gap

Quality research and data analysis identifies likely humanitarian needs and resource gaps that can prevent suffering. Aid workers need a one-stop-shop for credible climate information that is presented in a usable format at local and international levels. Aid workers need training and support in interpreting uncertain and complex situations, such as the use of early warning systems.

Examples of improving knowledge for the climate emergency include a course offered by International Committee of the Red Cross on [Sustainable Development in Humanitarian Action](#) and the [Norwegian Refugee Council’s work on shelter](#), and cross UN collaborations, such as the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs with the World Meteorological Organization, and the United Nations (UN) Environment Programme.



Planning for scale includes longer timeframes

Image: Dwarka Nath Sinha

2. Planning for scale

The climate emergency causes continual, overlapping, and compound emergencies. All areas of aid organisations must plan for a steep trajectory of need, the likes of which are unprecedented. Operational planning for the aid system needs to be revised to cope with frequent and deadly crises. Aid workers need to plan over longer timescales with donors shifting funding horizons to between four and ten years.

There are examples of such planning considerations taking place. The World Food Programme is moving towards a four-year planning cycle to accommodate long-term projects. The Plan International, Save the Children, and the UN High Commission for Refugees, have annual preparedness plans in country offices that stipulate how to respond to various seasonal hazards.

3. Acting early

Pre-emptive action saves lives, time, and money but the aid system is set up to respond only when emergencies are acute. There need to be clear thresholds for action, this means, having monitoring systems in place with agreed upon triggers, such as a certain number of days without rainfall. When the threshold is reached, groups act early to avoid a crisis such as crop failures due to

drought. Such action requires advance planning and costing, with expertise, funds, and stockpiles in place. This means that, if needed, communities receive support early while still healthy, rather than waiting until an acute crisis.

In 2020, the Government of Bangladesh, with support from the World Food Programme, provided vulnerable families with [cash assistance](#) to prepare for monsoon floods. In 2021, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs convened an [event](#) on anticipatory action involving partners from within and beyond the UN.

4. Resourcing fit for purpose

Aid organisations need greater access to sufficient and sustained goods, professionals, and funds. Organisations need to work together to inventory current supplies, quantify future needs, and fill gaps. Deployment of international staff will always be needed for large crises, but national responders will continue to save the most lives. Training and preparation efforts at a national level must be prioritised. Funds that arrive early save the most lives.

[Ready](#) is an initiative that aims to stop disease outbreaks before they become global by developing local preparedness response capacity and capability through training. [Impact17](#) facilitates funded collaborations between diverse stakeholders in support of the Sustainable Development Goals.

5. Collaborating across borders and sectors

The scale of the climate emergency transcends the capacity of any one nation or region. Prevention and response must include governments, humanitarian and development organisations, local NGOs, civil society, philanthropists, and businesses acting together for a

range of solutions and innovations. No opportunity must be missed.

The [Vanuatu Business Resilience Council](#) responded to Cyclone Harold (2020) by [supplying remote coastal households](#) with food and other items. The [Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs](#) and [UN Development Programme Connecting Business Initiative](#) engages the private sector in disaster preparedness, response, and recovery, including during the COVID-19 pandemic.

6. Getting the humanitarian house in order

All elements of humanitarian programming and response need to consider both people and the planet. Just as medical doctors aim to do no harm, humanitarian organisations must aim to prevent environmental harm, establishing a baseline of current environmental impacts and set targets in areas like energy, waste, and supply chains, integrating guidelines into operations and responses.

The International Committee of the Red Cross has a [climate-smart disaster risk reduction](#) initiative. The UN Environment Programme and the UN Office for the Coordination of Human Affairs jointly designed a [Nexus Environmental Assessment Tool](#) to allow humanitarian actors to quickly identify issues of environmental concern before designing longer-term emergency interventions. The [Climate and Environment Charter for Humanitarian Organisations](#) is an initiative where signatories translate charter commitments into time-bound targets and action plans, creating means by which mitigation and adaptation activities can be assessed and funded.

7. Speaking up

Aid organisations can advocate better for those most impacted by the climate emergency by connecting

the dots between seemingly separate issues such as severe weather, food shortages, and conflict. Aid workers need to be climate advocates and the climate emergency must be central to the practice and ethos of humanitarian organisations. Humanitarian organisations in both high- and low-income contexts must elevate the voices of those most impacted to influence global policy making.

Save the Children-UK will have a presence at the COP26 international climate negotiations. Amrita's story is a graphic novella that summarizes the seven recommendations made in this policy brief in an accessible format.



Summary of seven recommendations as presented in Amrita's Journey
Image: Dwarka Nath Sinha

Call to action

Based on our research, we identified the need for a new, funded, and proactive global humanitarian climate alliance that will guide the aid sector through the decisive actions needed to achieve these seven critical actions. This alliance will focus on:

Information and research: Understanding complex climate impacts, developing new approaches to gathering and applying knowledge to humanitarian response, and implementing frameworks essential for practical action.

Resources for response: Improving funding, building greater response capacity at local levels and providing rapid access to essential supplies.

Advocacy and policy engagement: Magnifying the voices of those most affected by the climate emergencies and transforming the aid system to be climate ready.

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The Project

Sounding the Siren is a collaboration between the Humanitarian and Conflict Response Institute, UK-Med, and Save the Children UK with funding from the UK Disasters Emergency Committee. Its goal is to identify how humanitarian aid needs to adapt to the climate emergency and to create a galvanising platform for action.

About HCRI

The Humanitarian and Conflict Response Institute (HCRI) is a leading global centre that is part of the University of Manchester. HCRI combines multiple disciplines from medicine to the humanities for the study of humanitarianism and conflict response, global health, international disaster management and peacebuilding. The *HCRI Policy Brief Series* is edited by Birte Vogel.