Environment and Humanitarian Assistance

This key sheet is part of a series of awareness raising tools developed by Irish Aid to accompany its Environment Policy for Sustainable Development.

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Irish Aid
Department of Foreign Affairs
An Roinn Gnóthaí Eachtracha

1. Introduction

This key sheet is part of a series of awareness raising tools developed by Irish Aid to accompany its Environment Policy for Sustainable Development.

Key strategies for implementing the policy are:

i) mainstreaming, where the environment is recognised as a critical part of sustainable development and is taken into account in all policies, programmes, activities and funding decisions; and

ii) partnership, where Irish Aid works with national governments, multilateral organisations, international agencies and civil society organisations to contribute to sustainable development.

The first step in environment mainstreaming is to understand how the environment is linked to the development challenge or sector YOU are responsible for. Aid agencies often need to react to humanitarian crises as quickly as possible, leaving limited opportunity to address sustainable development needs, or to view the situation and its impacts from a broader perspective. In this key sheet, we explain why it is critical that the environment should be considered as part of humanitarian response, and suggest sources of additional information. More detailed guidelines on mainstreaming environment into humanitarian assistance will be produced at a later date.

The environment matters in humanitarian action because:

> The poor are disproportionately dependent on the environment — and thus particularly vulnerable to its degradation, which can worsen acute human suffering at times of crisis.

> Crises often arise from, or are perpetuated by, human mismanagement of the environment.

> Badly planned humanitarian aid can damage the environment during a crisis and increase the risk of future crises.

> Good humanitarian assistance can improve current environmental conditions and reduce environmental damage in the future, thus reducing the risk of future crises.

Internally displaced persons. Up to a million people have fled their homes following violent attacks by militants. Garsila, Darfur, Sudan. Panos/Petterik Wiggers

2. Why is the environment relevant to humanitarian assistance?

2.1 What is humanitarian assistance?

The Good Humanitarian Donorship initiative[1] (2003) defines the objectives of humanitarian action as being: "to save lives, alleviate suffering and maintain human dignity during and in the aftermath of man-made crises and natural disasters, as well as to prevent and strengthen preparedness for the occurrence of such situations". This suggests that aid agencies' remit should cover a broad range of goals in relief, recovery, prevention, preparedness and mitigation. Often, however, it takes a disaster to highlight the importance of preparing for and reducing risk, rather than waiting to respond to emergencies (see Box 1).

↘ Box 1 Responding to the Mozambique floods — a long-term strategy

In 2000, huge tracts of Mozambique's coastal infrastructure were destroyed in floods. In Xai Xai, the hospital was cut off from the town because of extensive damage to the connecting road, making it impossible for ambulances to get casualties to hospital.

In response to the floods, and with the aim of reducing any future risks from flooding, the government of Mozambique and donors sought a new strategy for rebuilding the damaged infrastructure, based on the principles of disaster risk reduction. The country's roads sector has invested in engineering expertise to ensure its infrastructure can withstand future flooding.

New techniques have been used to reinforce bridges and design new culverts that will allow water to move under roads and so reduce gullying and erosion. Roads rehabilitated with support from Irish Aid in Xai Xai were rerouted, redesigned and engineered to withstand future floods.

2.2 What are the international standards for humanitarian assistance?

The Sphere Minimum Standards in Disaster Response identify the environment as a crosscutting issue to be incorporated into all humanitarian activities. Environment is also a crosscutting issue in the United Nations cluster process for the management of humanitarian assistance. The "do no harm" concept[2] implies that humanitarian actors and donors should specifically avoid providing aid that worsens conditions for crisis victims, in the short and long term.

2.3 How humanitarian crisis and environmental damage are linked

The links between natural events, human actions and environmental factors are many and complex. Crises can occur suddenly or over time. They can be triggered by immediate human action, develop over time with changes to the natural environment, or result from a combination of both (see Box 2).

↘ Box 2 Causes of humanitarian crises

Human

Sudden, human-induced crises result from collapsed buildings or mines; transport disasters; industrial accidents such as the 1986 Chernobyl explosion, which caused widespread radioactive contamination, or the 1984 leak of toxic gas in Bhopal, India, that led to an estimated 20,000 deaths; and often, war. Long-term human-triggered crises include protracted refugee situations (Southern Lebanon and Pakistan, for example), or chronic food insecurity resulting from unsuccessful development or social policies.

Natural

Quick-onset events such as hurricanes, earthquakes, floods and volcanic eruptions can lead to disasters and humanitarian crises if populations are not warned and prepared. Drought is often a slow-onset crisis which can lead to food shortages, and is a particular problem where the capacity to address this recurrent environmental condition is not strong (e.g. where there are few alternative livelihoods or access to innovations such as drought resistant crops and irrigation is limited)

Human-natural connections

Human activities may have a substantial impact on the severity of humanitarian crises, particularly in the context of changes to the natural environment. For instance, the 2004 flood in Gonaives, Haiti, was exacerbated by deforestation.

Many humanitarian crises originate in the interaction of humans with the environment. Unpacking the deep or root causes of some humanitarian crises can be complicated and demands analysis that extends beyond preconceived notions and media-driven awareness. A Humanitarian Policy Group review of the causes of Niger's 2005 drought and food crisis is an example of this type of analysis. It concluded that humanitarian response was too slow. It questioned the quality of early-warning systems; the appropriateness of the proposed responses; and the capacity and preparedness of development and humanitarian actors to respond to what should have been a predictable crisis.

1 Irish Aid is actively engaged in the Good Humanitarian Donorship initiative. The 23 Principles and Good Practice of Humanitarian Donorship endorsed in Stockholm in 2003 can be found at www.reliefweb.int/ghd/Stockholm%20-%20GHD%20Principles%20and%20IP.doc

2 Anderson 1999

As Box 2 shows, factors such as environmental degradation can contribute to humanitarian crises — as can a scarcity of natural resources, which may lead to conflict as people compete for them. In Nicaragua, conflict arose between people using water from the upper reaches of the Calico River for irrigation with people downstream who needed water for household use. In Sudan, environmental degradation and competition for access to natural resources such as land and water have been described as "probably the most important factor behind conflict among the peoples of the country"[3]

Many recent or ongoing civil wars are being or have been fuelled by oil, diamonds, timber and other natural resources. The immediate impact of such events can be loss of human life, pollution and damage to essential infrastructure such as water and sanitation. Over the longer term, further degradation or depletion of natural resources such as water, farmland, pastureland and forests puts vulnerable populations at risk by reducing their livelihood options and food availability. This can lead to large-scale displacement, with further suffering and environmental damage, as is evident in Sudan's Darfur region.

The ways in which crises are caused by, and affect, people and the natural environment in which they live are increasingly complex, especially as the impacts of climate change are felt. As more and more people flock to cities, or settle along coasts vulnerable to cyclones or near rivers at risk of flooding, the human, economic and environmental costs will rise as the knock-on effects from climate change — such as higher sea level and more severe storms — accumulate. Action is needed now to prevent and mitigate foreseeable humanitarian crises, and in particular to avoid environmental damage, which can result in forced migration.

2.4 Conflict related to environmental issues

A significant contributing factor in the Darfur conflict in western Sudan is tension between nomads and farmers over land and water.[4] There is already competition over scarce natural resources such as pasture and water, so the impacts of climate change are likely to accentuate these problems and fuel renewed conflict over diminishing resources.

Nigeria is beset by ongoing local crises triggered by competition over natural resources; best know is the conflict in the oil-rich Niger Delta, where minority ethnic groups say that foreign companies and Nigeria's ruling elite are exploiting the oil resources without remunerating adequately those from whose ancestral land the oil is drawn. Many Nigerian communities and villages are also at loggerheads over the collection of sand from rivers, cutting timber and access to land for farming. While small in scale, such conflicts contribute to the country's ever-present social tensions and have triggered larger-scale violence in the past. As such, they represent a significant challenge to sustainable environmental management and poverty reduction.

In countries including Angola, Liberia and Sierra Leone, environmental assets such as gold, diamonds, oil and timber — often illegally extracted — have fuelled local, civil or international conflict.[5] In the future, regional and international instability is expected to intensify due to competition for oil, water and other environmental resources.[6]

2.5 How humanitarian assistance can damage the environment

In a humanitarian crisis, efforts to address environmental management and sustainability may seem at odds with the aim of saving lives. As one recent report[7] puts it: "The midst of a humanitarian crisis may not look like the best time to start trying to hug trees." Still, failing to consider the environment when providing relief aid can lead to a flawed understanding of an emerging crisis and produce relief efforts that actually lead to environmental damage.

Cases of environmental damage arising from humanitarian assistance are not well incorporated into the official literature, in part because they reflect poorly on the assistance providers. In Rwandan refugee camps in Tanzania, for instance, it was realized that the unmilled maize provided as food aid took longer to cook and led to more tree cutting than milled maize. Despite this lesson, unmilled maize was provided to the displaced in Darfur, even though women there faced considerable personal danger while out collecting firewood.

Concerns about deforestation in post-tsunami Aceh, Indonesia, led to a general shift towards building with bricks — until it was discovered that the volume of wood needed to fire the bricks was greater than that needed to rebuild wooden houses. Post-hurricane shelter programmes in Latin America built housing in areas liable to flooding thereby increasing the risk to inhabitants of future hurricanes.

Ensuring that people have adequate sanitation and safe water are often major challenges in humanitarian crises. Good guidance exists on these issues, for instance in the excellent *Engineering in Emergencies*,[8] or from UNICEF and WHO. Environmental sanitation can reduce the risk of disease and malnutrition, yet for various reasons it often receives scant attention in an initial humanitarian response.

3 IDRC/World Bank 1999

4 House of Commons 2004

5 FAO 2005

6 ORG 2006

7 Benfield Hazard Research Centre (2006)

8 Davis, J. and R. Lambert (2002)

The Kosovo crisis in the late 1990s, for instance, showed how it often takes more than good guidance to recognise and address environmental issues in a humanitarian crisis.[9] In 1999, some 460,000 Kosovan refugees moved into Albania. Tens of thousands of them stayed in Kukes, despite the site's inadequate water supplies and no sanitary services. Unsurprisingly, NGOs reported an increase of 30 to 40 per cent in diarrhoeal diseases.

3. Crises, poverty and the environment

Many poor rural families depend directly on the environment for subsistence or income generation via small-scale farming, animal rearing, fishing, hunting, and collecting water, fuelwood, food and other natural products[10]. As a result, environmental degradation or a sudden crisis that affects these assets can be disastrous for the poor. Typically, over 90 per cent of deaths from natural disasters occur in countries of low or medium development that have a limited capacity to adapt to or prepare for these events[11]. Investing in better environmental management as part of disaster risk reduction strategies can reduce the incidence of natural disasters and have economic benefits (see Section 4.2).

These environment-related problems are set to worsen, as human-induced climate change will affect the world's marginalized people most severely, further increasing the poverty and livelihood challenges facing low and middle-income countries[12] (Box 3).

↘ Box 3 Climate change, vulnerability and risk reduction

Most natural disasters are climate or weather related. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's latest assessment report[13] makes it clear that climate change will disproportionately affect poor countries and poor communities.

People who live in the least developed countries, the small island developing states, Asia's vast river deltas and most African nations are most vulnerable and will need to adapt to reduce their vulnerability to future shocks.

Efforts are under way to assist countries and communities to adapt to climate change. They include the work of the Vulnerability and Action Resource Group,[14] which brings together multilateral and bilateral agencies to share knowledge on adaptation, vulnerability and development. In addition, the CLACC network[15] is working to build the capacity of organisations in 15 of the least developed countries to promote adaptation to climate change and sustainable development.

In June 2007, the UK Tyndall Centre for Climate Change Research published an assessment of the future climate change regime.[16] It stated that a key priority of the UN climate change convention's work programme on adaptation "is the successful identification of ways to integrate climate change adaptation into national planning processes, especially those that promote disaster risk management, sustainable economic growth and the eradication of poverty". The integration of climate change into national planning processes is also the cornerstone of the EU Action Plan on Climate Change in the Context of Development Cooperation.[17]

9 UNHCR 1999
10 WRI 2005
11 Statistics for 1995-2004, IFRC, 2005
12 World Bank 2005a

13 http://www.ipcc.ch/ipccreports/ar4_wg2.htm
14 www.climatevarg.org
15 www.clacc.net
16 Okereke 2007
17 http://europa.eu.int/comm/development/body/theme/environment/index.htm

4. How humanitarian assistance can promote sustainable development

4.1 Integrating environmental issues into humanitarian assistance

The principles of Good Humanitarian Donorship call on donors to use humanitarian assistance to support the transition from relief and recovery to long-term development and sustainable livelihoods. Such assistance can both reduce the impacts of future crises and improve environmental management.

The principles also outline the need for humanitarian assistance to strengthen the capacity of communities to prevent, prepare for and mitigate crises. One way of doing this is to integrate environmental issues into humanitarian responses (see Box 4).

Post-tsunami relief operations in Galle, Sri Lanka, specifically focused on debris clearance and included recycling and aid to homeowners to salvage material for reconstruction. Aside from asset transfers through cash for work (important in funding self-driven reconstruction), the programmes reduced the need for new landfills and demand for scarce resources for rebuilding, such as wood. Dumping of debris on beaches, a natural resource critical for tourism and post-disaster recovery, was also curtailed. Significantly, debris-clearing in Galle had strong local support since it was key to restarting the economically important tourist industry.

Community disaster risk-reduction efforts in Tajikistan include a mapping of potential landslides — a common problem in a mountainous country. This mapping encouraged communities to initiate efforts to reduce the impact of these hazards through reforestation and improved land use, highlighting how good environmental stewardship can also be good disaster risk reduction.

Investing in disaster preparedness and locally implemented early warning systems can save lives and reduce the costs of a crisis. Estimates suggest a saving of US$4-10 for every US$1 spent on disaster mitigation.[18] A study on the impact of flooding in the Indian state of Bihar concluded that 3.8 rupees could be saved for every rupee spent on flood protection.[19] The World Bank and other international financial organizations are working to integrate risk reduction into development programmes to reduce the future cost of disasters.[20] Some donors are even considering committing a percentage of the funds they spend on emergency response to Disaster Risk Reduction.

↘ Box 4 Managing the long-term impact of refugees in eastern Sudan

Ethiopian and Eritrean refugees have been living in eastern Sudan for decades, with the numbers peaking at over a million in 1991. With peace in Eritrea and Ethiopia, the UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) began to facilitate the slow process of repatriation. However, many refugees are still displaced and living in host communities.

The presence of large numbers of refugees in eastern Sudan for several decades has had a significant impact on the arid environments near Gedaref, Kassala and elsewhere. Since 1997, the World Conservation Union (IUCN), UNHCR, CARE, the Sudanese authorities and others have been implementing a programme to remediate the environment in refugee hosting areas as well as the war-ravaged home villages of the refugees. Financed by donors including Irish Aid, the programme seeks to build the capacity of the local authorities, the host community and refugees to co-manage their natural resources and put in place sustainable environmental rehabilitation activities such as the planting of trees and drought-resistant crops, and water resource management.

The project has created a model for post-conflict environmental restoration in refugee hosting areas, and sustainable natural resource management for refugees returning home.

4.2 Protecting the environment to prevent future disasters

The link between better environmental management and a reduction in the occurrence and intensity of disasters can be highlighted in a number of ways.

> The World Food Programme has supported soil conservation and reforestation programmes in refugee camps[21] thus helping to protect against flooding, landslides and other natural disasters in these areas.
> The Vietnam Red Cross has planted mangrove seedlings over 12,000 hectares of coastline to reduce the impact of storms, high tides and typhoons.[22]
> In a programme led by Practical Action, farmers in Sri Lanka are testing salt-tolerant varieties of rice that can grow on

18 Action Aid, Benfield Hazard Research Centre and Centre for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters (2002)

19 Tearfund (2006a)

20 More information on disaster risk reduction is available from ProVention (www.provention.org) and the International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (www.isdr.org).

21 Telford, J., E. Mikkola, P. Bianchi, A. Kourula (2005)

22 World Bank 2005b

land prone to coastal flooding, which if successful would help ensure food security.
> In Kenya, NGOs are helping communities build "sand dams" that retain seasonal rainfall and improve local resilience to drought.[23]
> Farmers in Niger and Burkina Faso have adopted natural resource management farming methods that have boosted food production, reduced the impact of drought and increased the overall volume of trees and other vegetation in drought-prone areas.[24]

It is thus crucial to factor environmental issues into disaster preparation, mitigation and response strategies. This is now starting to happen under a variety of humanitarian aid programmes (see Box 5).

The Global Platform for Disaster Risk Reduction, which held its first session in June 2007, was set up to find ways of strengthening the UN's International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (ISDR). It brings together experts in development and humanitarian work with those from environmental and scientific fields related to disaster risk reduction. One of its aims is to contribute to the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals particularly in respect of poverty reduction and environmental sustainability.

↘ Box 5 UNHCR guidelines on managing the environment in refugee operations

Many of the UNHCR's guidelines (1998) relate to refugee-specific emergencies, but the principles are useful to humanitarian crises in general:

> Prevention is better than cure.
> Environment programmes need not be complex, nor costly.
> Environmental management is more than providing fuel-efficient stoves and planting trees.
> Interventions should add value to environmental assets and practices.
> Access rights and benefit-sharing are fundamental to good environmental management.
> Co-ordination and implementation are vital but separate environmental roles.
> Influencing policy can be as important as defining practice.
> Relief and development assistance should be compatible.
> Protect the environment to safeguard asylum.

23 Brahic 2006

24 Polgreen, L. (2007); Reij, C. and T. Thiombiano (2003)

5. Mainstreaming the environment into humanitarian assistance

Opportunities to integrate the environment into humanitarian response include:

> Ensuring that crisis relief has the least possible negative impact on the environment, while recognizing that saving lives and livelihoods is the humanitarian imperative

> Ensuring that the complex interactions between humans, the environment and crises are reflected in needs assessments and the proposals presented for funding. Disaster responses do not always allow time for full environmental impact assessments, but sufficient tools exist for the rapid and sufficient screening of even the most urgent interventions.

> Supporting UN efforts to mainstream environmental considerations into various aspects of the humanitarian reform process, including the Cluster Approach, through which UN agencies work together to coordinate specific clusters of work (e.g. water, sanitation and hygiene).

> Supporting the development and use of environmental impact-assessment tools by UN agencies, NGOs, government bodies and other actors.

> Supporting programmes that build government and local capacity to prepare for and mitigate the environmental impacts of crises.

> Supporting programmes that aim to reduce the vulnerability of those most at risk by encouraging sustainable land-use and natural resource management approaches.

> Ensuring that relief and recovery strategies are linked to sustainable development.

> Supporting conflict resolution, including cooperation over natural resources and environmental services as a potential basis for peace building (e.g. Ireland's new Conflict Resolution Unit in the Department of Foreign Affairs).

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A young girl walks amongst the lines of tents at a camp for people displaced by the earthquake which struck Pakistani-administered Kashmir in 2005. At least 73,000 people were killed by the 7.6 magnitude earthquake. Panos

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Useful websites

- International Strategy for Disaster Reduction **www.unisdr.org/**
- World Resources Institute (WRI) **www.wri.org**
- UN Refugee Agency **www.unhcr.org**
- Benfield ULC Hazard Research Centre, Rapid Environmental Impact Assessment Project **www.benfieldhrc.org/rea_index.htm**

  The website also includes a beta version of UNHCR's FRAME (Framework for Assessment and Management of the Environment) tools and UN Department for Peacekeeping Operations' guidance on environmental impact assessment and minimization of peacekeeping operations.
- Global Platform for Disaster Risk Reduction **www.preventionweb.net/globalplatform**
- Humanitarian Timber **www.humanitariantimber.org**
- World Conservation Organization **www.iucn.org**
- EU Action Plan on Climate Change in the Context of Development Cooperation **http://europa.eu.int/comm/development/body/theme/environment/index.htm**
- *Principles and Good Practice of Humanitarian Donorship* www.reliefweb.int/ghd/a%2023%20Principles%20EN-GHD19.10.04%20RED.doc
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