

ENVIRONMENT AND HUMANITARIAN ACTION

Country Study Afghanistan



JOINT UNEP/OCHA ENVIRONMENT UNIT

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

Table of contents

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	2
ACRONYMS	3
1. BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT	4
1.1 Objectives and scope	4
1.2 Environment and humanitarian context of Afghanistan	4
2. KEY FINDINGS	6
2.1 Accountability	6
2.2 Cluster specific environmental recommendations	8
2.2.1 WASH Cluster	8
2.2.2 Health Cluster	10
2.2.3 Emergency Shelter and Non Food Items (NFI)	10
2.2.4 Multisector Refugees Response	10
2.3 Overview of the Humanitarian Program Cycle and the Common Humanitarian Fund ..	12
2.3.1 Emergency Preparedness	12
2.3.2 Needs Assessment/Analysis	12
2.3.3 Response Planning	12
2.3.4 Resource mobilisation and the Common Humanitarian Fund	12
2.3.5. Monitoring	13
3. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS	14
BIBLIOGRAPHY	16

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

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.

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