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Do No Environmental Harm

A joint position paper by ADRA, Help, Malteser International, and World Vision

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Malteser International
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ABSTRACT

The principle of 'Do No Environmental Harm' is becoming an essential standard in humanitarian action. As the impacts of climate change and environmental degradation intensify, humanitarian organisations must not only respond to immediate needs but also ensure that their interventions do not further harm the environment or the communities they aim to assist. Integrating environmental considerations is essential for safeguarding livelihoods, strengthening resilience, and supporting sustainable recovery. This paper explores how the principle of 'Do No Environmental Harm' builds on the broader ethical foundation of 'Do No Harm', why greening humanitarian action is urgent, and how humanitarian considerations can be embedded into humanitarian operations.

INTRODUCTION

The humanitarian principle of 'Do No Harm' guides humanitarian actors to avoid causing unintended harm to communities, traditionally focusing on social, political, and conflict-related risks.[1] The German Federal Foreign Office (GFFO) acknowledges the intersection between the climate crisis and the principle and lays it out in their Humanitarian Strategy.[2]

Building on this foundation, the concept of 'Do No Environmental Harm' adapts and expands the principle to include environmental responsibility. As the link between environmental degradation, climate change, and humanitarian crises becomes increasingly evident, it is no longer adequate to focus solely on immediate human impacts. Humanitarian action must also be designed to protect the natural systems that communities depend on for their survival and recovery. 'Do No Environmental Harm' means minimising negative environmental impacts induring all aspects of humanitarian response.

Greening the humanitarian sector is no longer a choice; it is a necessity. Humanitarian organisations must recognise that environmental harm undermines long-term resilience and exacerbates vulnerabilities of affected communities, especially in already fragile settings. Ignoring environmental factors in today's action can fuel tomorrow's crisis, accelerate resource conflicts, increase displacement and thus create greater humanitarian needs in the future. Therefore, embedding environmental sustainability into humanitarian action is critical not just for ethical reasons, but also for the effectiveness and relevance of humanitarian action itself. In the face of the climate crisis, greening humanitarian efforts is a strategic imperative for ensuring that aid today does not become harm tomorrow.

'Do No Environmental Harm' & WASH: A case from South Sudan

Increased demand for water uses because of growing population and climate change contributed to the upgrading of a low yielding borehole in April 2021. The high cost of diesel fuel, along with concerns about its reliability and affordability, made it an unsuitable option—leading to the choice of a climate-smart solution that uses solar energy ('free sun') to provide safe water to the population.

More than 1,000 people are served by this system implemented by Malteser International. The average daily yield is 40,000 litres of reliable water supply throughout the year, with no disruptions in supply, as compared to other water sources available (majorly handpumps). This was evident for the past four years, as there has been no breakage or any supply interruptions that hindered access to safe water.

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If the system had been powered by a 6-kW diesel generator, this would consume about 14.4 litres per day, with 2.7 kg CO_2 emissions per litre. This would result in approximately 14 tons CO_2 annually. In comparison, the per capita CO_2 emission from fossil fuel use and industry in South Sudan is 0.14 tons.[3]

It should also be noted that if the quality of diesel is inferior, emissions will even be higher. Transport of diesel by road in conflict-prone areas like South Sudan can be cumbersome, which is an additional reason to opt for solarised pumping systems.

The solar-powered borehole system offers significant long-term cost savings compared to a diesel-powered system. Over a 10-year period, the operational costs of a solar-powered system are only about 10 to 20% of those for a diesel system.

Although the initial investment for a solar-powered pumping system can be three to five times higher than that of a diesel-powered system, the average break-even point is around four years. This break-even time can vary depending on factors such as system size, water demand, and local diesel prices.

[1] IFRC, 2016
[2] *„Humanitarian assistance should always be provided in such a way that it meets the most urgent needs first and does not have any harmful side effects, i.e. it does not have an adverse impact on the environment or conflicts – the "do no harm" principle."* In: AA, 2024.
[3] Hannah Ritchie et al., 2020

WHAT ARE THE ADVANTAGES OF GREENING HUMANITARIAN ACTION?

We see a wide range of interrelated benefits that strengthen both operational effectiveness including risk mitigation and the well-being of affected communities when integrating environmental sustainability throughout the process in humanitarian action from planning over procuring until delivery of aid services.

Risk mitigation & Crisis prevention

Poor environmental management can significantly exacerbate disasters—such as deforestation leading to floods and soil erosion, or water pollution and fuel spills creating environmental and public health risks. To prevent such issues, **environmental screenings or impact assessments** should be conducted before or during project design. This process helps identify potential hazards including flooding, erosion, pollution hotspots (e.g., pit latrines, diesel or agrochemical storage), and biodiversity loss, while also assessing both negative impacts and possible environmental co-benefits.

By integrating ecological considerations through **green(er) approaches**, many risks can be mitigated within the project itself. This may include establishing buffer zones, rescheduling or relocating activities, planning eco-friendly alternatives, and implementing waste management systems that reduce pollution and control disease vectors such as mosquitoes and rodents. Importantly, these measures can also enhance **community acceptance and ownership** of the project.

Cost Efficiency

Adopting environmentally sustainable ('green') approaches can lead to significant **cost savings** through optimised resource use, reduced maintenance, and lower long-term operational expenses. Crucially, addressing ecological and health risks **at the design stage** can help avoid costly interventions later.

Examples of cost-efficient measures include the use of **solar energy instead of diesel generators**, and the application of **locally appropriate materials and techniques** that reduce ongoing repair and replacement needs. For instance, **the Red Cross in Costa Rica** achieved a 19% reduction in fuel consumption and a 50% decrease in vehicle-related accidents by optimising their fleet management system.[4]

Community ownership and social co-benefits of green interventions

Greening is not just an operational priority; it is also a powerful tool for **community engagement and empowerment**. When environmental screenings or assessments are conducted through **inclusive, participatory processes**, they can build **local capacity for natural resource management**. This fosters sustained practices such as **waste recycling, fuel-efficient cooking, and water conservation** beyond the project lifecycle. These social co-benefits promote **community cohesion**, deepen environmentally responsible behaviours, and **amplify the long-term impact** of humanitarian action.

Resilience Strengthening

Greening interventions goes beyond the principle of 'Do No Harm' by restoring ecosystems and supporting sustainable livelihoods. This is particularly important in rural areas, where vulnerable communities are highly dependent on natural resources and healthy ecosystems.

For example, investing in soil health through **conservation agriculture** techniques not only boosts productivity but also ensures **long-term food security**, particularly for vulnerable communities whose livelihoods depend on small-scale farming. **Nature-based solutions**, such as wetlands restoration, serve not only as ecological buffers against climate shocks but also protect the most at-risk populations from displacement and the loss of vital resources. Similarly, **climate-resilient farming and housing** directly enhance the safety, dignity, and resilience of communities facing increasing weather extremes. To ensure the success and sustainability of such eco-sensitive measures, **participatory approaches** involving affected communities, local governments, and education stakeholders are essential. These inclusive processes foster local ownership, build awareness, and integrate environmental and humanitarian considerations into local planning, ultimately supporting both human well-being and ecological integrity.

Data for evidence-based decision-making

Integrating environmental data systematically into all phases of project planning—**assessment, design, monitoring, and evaluation**—enables more informed and adaptive programming. It supports **transparent decision-making** and fosters trust among local communities, government authorities, and donors.

Embedding environmental indicators in **Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability, and Learning (MEAL)** frameworks helps identify both risks and opportunities, allowing timely adjustments to project design. Ultimately, using reliable environmental data not only reduces risks and improves resource allocation, it also strengthens overall impact and delivers **greener, more resilient humanitarian action**.

[4] IFRC, 2022

HOW IS GREENING TECHNICALLY IMPLEMENTED?

From an environmental perspective, humanitarian action often carries a substantial ecological footprint. Food supplies are frequently transported across continents, packaged in single-use plastics and aluminium foil, resulting in significant waste accumulation and environmental degradation at distribution sites. While the **primary objective of humanitarian action is to save lives**, interventions are often implemented under urgent, high-pressure conditions—leaving limited time or capacity to prioritise environmental considerations. However, **opportunities do exist** to reduce the environmental impact of essential humanitarian services such as the provision of water, food, hygiene items, shelter, and health infrastructure.

‘Do No Environmental Harm’ & Food Security: A case from Burkina Faso

Most humanitarian projects involve the distribution of food at various stages of processing. Take, for example, a typical project in Burkina Faso, a Sahelian country facing a complex and protracted crisis. Armed conflict and climate change have forced many people to flee their ancestral homes. These internally displaced persons (IDPs) seek refuge in nearby or distant communities, which then become host communities. The influx of displaced people often more than doubles the population in these areas without a corresponding increase in land or natural resources. As a result, IDPs—through no fault of their own—place additional pressure on already scarce resources such as land, water, and vegetation. These are resources that have historically been at the heart of many conflicts in the region, even without the added strain of displacement.

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To address the situation, a humanitarian plan might include distributing dry staples like rice and beans. While this seems straightforward, it overlooks a critical issue: in the project region, food is typically cooked over open fires using firewood. This creates a sharp spike in fuel demand—fuel that is already scarce and contested.

To minimize environmental harm, the project should include energy-saving cookstoves, reforestation activities, and ideally the provision of sustainable fuel alternatives such as gas stoves with refillable cartridges or even biogas. However, this is where challenges arise. The NGO workers know these complementary measures are essential to avoid exacerbating environmental degradation. But they also know that a humanitarian donor only funds activities classified as ‚directly life-saving‘. Fearing rejection of the proposal, they either omit these components or include them only tentatively.

As a result, interventions that are critical to meeting the ‘Do No Environmental Harm’ principle are underprioritized, underfunded, and underimplemented. The project might get approved and implemented, but at a high cost.[5] Without addressing the environmental impact, such projects risk degrading the landscape further, fuelling additional crises, and driving even more displacement—ironically, achieving the opposite of what ‘Do No Harm’ is meant to ensure.[6]

To be most effective and cost-efficient, **greening measures should be integrated into project design from the outset**. Ideally, they are informed by preliminary **environmental screenings or impact assessments**, followed by a careful analysis of risks and feasible mitigation strategies. By embedding environmental considerations in every phase of the project cycle, humanitarian actors can **minimise harm, enhance efficiency**, and contribute to **long-term sustainability**—even in the most challenging operational settings.

Key technical measures include eco-friendly procurement (e.g. biodegradable packaging, local sourcing), waste reduction and recycling systems, energy-efficient technologies, such as solar-powered water pumps and lighting, sustainable construction materials and designs or low-emission transport solutions. Some greening tools or measures are explained in more detail on the next page.

[5] As a Food Security project, people should first and foremost be nourished. The absence of sufficient fuel quantities can lead to different coping mechanisms, like undercooking food, skipping meals or trading in food or even sex for fuel, just to mention a few—all of them definitely Do Harm.

[6] The fact that the measures mentioned above are also ways of curbing gender-based violence should not go unmentioned, because *„Women working in conflict-affected settings routinely experience physical, emotional and psychological insecurity, including sexual violence, when carrying out daily tasks linked to the collection and use of natural resources.“* In: CIFOR-ICRAF, 2024.

Carbon accounting

One critical activity in this context is **carbon accounting**. Measuring and managing greenhouse gas emissions is not merely an administrative exercise—it is a strategic tool to **identify reduction opportunities and increase climate accountability**. In the humanitarian sector, carbon accounting is often conducted at the project level using simplified tools such as the **Humanitarian Carbon Calculator (HCC+)**. This tool enables organisations to estimate emissions and explore mitigation options in a context-appropriate and accessible manner.

Environmental Screenings and Impact Assessments

Environmental screenings and impact assessments are not ends in themselves, but essential steps for identifying and mitigating environmental risks **before** they materialise. Over recent years, these assessments have gained increasing importance in the humanitarian sector. **Many donors now require environmental screening as part of their funding conditions**, reflecting the growing recognition of the need for environmentally responsible humanitarian action.

On the tool development side, there has been meaningful progress. **The Nexus Environmental Assessment Tool (NEAT+)** has become a widely accepted standard for rapid environmental screening among practitioners. Developed under the Joint Initiative on Environment in Humanitarian Action, it builds on the Norwegian Refugee Council's original NEAT and incorporates leading environmental guidelines (e.g. QSAND, USAID, WWF, FAO). Designed for ease of use, NEAT+ offers quick assessments of potential environmental risks and suggests tailored mitigation measures based on the specific project context. It is **accessible to non-environmental specialists**, does not require community consultation (though such engagement is always valuable), and is accepted by key donors.

'Do No Environmental Harm' & Education in Emergency (EiE): A case from Ethiopia

In Ethiopia's Tigray region, the Education in Emergency project supports 15 schools to reach 9,000 children and teachers affected by conflict. Among the barriers to continued education, menstrual hygiene remains a major challenge, particularly for girls, contributing to stigma, absenteeism, and school dropout.

To tackle these issues, gender clubs have been established to provide peer support and promote gender-sensitive solutions. One innovative activity involves teachers and students producing reusable menstrual pads—an eco-friendly, low-cost alternative to disposable products that not only helps reduce school absenteeism but also raises awareness about waste reduction and sustainable practices. By engaging youth directly in the design and the production process, this approach builds skills and promotes climate-conscious thinking while responding to immediate humanitarian needs.

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This initiative goes beyond addressing practical needs: It restores dignity, empowers students, and reinforces the right to education in times of crisis. For girls in particular, access to menstrual solutions can mean the difference between continuing their education or being forced to drop out. In a context marked by displacement, trauma, and uncertainty, such interventions offer not only protection and continuity but also a pathway toward sustainability. By replacing disposable products with reusable, locally produced alternatives, the project actively reduces waste and environmental strain—particularly important in fragile ecosystems affected by conflict and climate stress. Through hands-on participation, students gain not just practical skills but also a sense of environmental stewardship, embedding climate awareness and low-waste practices into daily life. This holistic approach demonstrates that green thinking can and must be integrated into humanitarian education responses—safeguarding human dignity while protecting the planet.

Although many practitioners agree that **NEAT+ is not a perfect tool**, there is broad consensus that it is currently **the most practical and widely supported option available**. Unfortunately, recent global developments have led to a suspension of funding for NEAT+, leaving its future uncertain and placing this valuable tool 'on ice' at a time when it is needed most.

Several NGOs have developed their own tools for **Environmental Impact Assessments** (EIAs), which—by definition—are more comprehensive and in-depth than environmental screenings, tailoring them to their specific operational needs. However, unlike NEAT+, none of these tools have emerged as a widely adopted standard across the sector.

Policy Commitments and Frameworks: From Vision to Action

Another milestone in the mainstreaming of environmental responsibility in humanitarian action is the **Climate and Environment Charter for Humanitarian Organisations**, launched in 2021 by the International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA). The Charter aims to rally collective action in response to the climate and environmental crises, **shifting the conversation from why greening matters to how it can be implemented**.

The Charter enables organisations to define their own **sustainability goals** and **voluntary commitments**, providing a flexible yet structured pathway for environmental integration. While some critics argue that the Charter lacks enforceability, it represents an important **first step toward more binding action** and offers a framework upon which stronger mechanisms can be built.

THE ROLE OF DONORS: CATALYSTS FOR CHANGE

The uptake of tools like **NEAT+, the Humanitarian Carbon Calculator**, and other screening and planning resources has been largely driven by the **strong commitment of donors**. Their leadership has been critical in pushing the humanitarian sector toward more sustainable, circular, and environmentally responsible practices.

Initiatives such as **DG ECHO's Minimum Environmental Requirements & Recommendations, USAID's climate strategies**, and the **greening policies of agencies like UNHCR and WFP** clearly demonstrate this shift. These frameworks not only help reduce ecological harm but also improve the quality and sustainability of humanitarian action.

To maintain this momentum, it is essential that **donors continue to invest** in environmental mainstreaming and strengthen their policy frameworks. With ongoing support and commitment, environmental responsibility can become a **core component of all humanitarian responses**, helping to safeguard both people and the planet.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO POLICY MAKERS

To ensure that the humanitarian sector can fulfil the principle of 'Do No Environmental Harm' effectively and at scale, we urge policy makers—particularly those at the German Federal Foreign Office (GFFO), DG ECHO, and other donor institutions—to take the following steps:

1. **Ensure sustained support for NEAT+**. The Nexus Environmental Assessment Tool (NEAT+) is the most widely used and recognised tool for rapid environmental screening in humanitarian action. NEAT+ has proven its practical value across diverse contexts, yet its future is now uncertain due to stalled funding (e.g. USAID cuts). Donors must ensure sustained support for its technical upkeep, regular updates, training modules, and integration into operations—so that humanitarian actors can continue to identify environmental risks early and apply effective mitigation measures.

2. **Treat Greening as the cross-cutting issue it is**—in policy, in practice, and in financial terms. Greening must be reflected in donor budget lines as an integral component of humanitarian programming. This includes enabling funding for 'indirectly life-saving' measures like energy-saving cookstoves, reforestation, solarisation, or sustainable fuel alternatives.

3. **Establish regular and meaningful exchange with civil society and local actors**, not merely as a formality, but as an essential step toward more grounded and context-sensitive policy. Local and international NGOs bring critical insights from implementation realities, which must inform donor strategies and frameworks.

4. **Build on the Donor Declaration on Climate and Environment**. The Donor Declaration on Climate and Environment is a welcome and important step toward embedding environmental responsibility in humanitarian action. It reflects a growing recognition that ecological sustainability must be central to effective and ethical response. To realise its full potential, donors who have endorsed the declaration should now move from commitment to implementation—ensuring its principles guide eligibility criteria, proposal assessments, monitoring frameworks, and reporting requirements. DG ECHO's Minimum Environmental Requirements represent a concrete and commendable example of this shift. The MERs define a baseline set of environmental standards for all ECHO-funded humanitarian projects, including requirements for environmental screening, sustainable procurement, waste management, and fuel use. These requirements are designed to be practical, adaptable across sectors, and implementable even in emergency contexts—making them an important operational benchmark for greening humanitarian action. At the same time, other donors are encouraged to use both the declaration and the MERs as blueprints, and to join this collective effort toward a harmonised and accountable environmental standard across the sector.

Effective greening of humanitarian action needs strategic and well-funded donor support —turning good intentions into lasting environmental resilience and risk reduction.

CONTACTS

Carina Rolly
Global Climate Policy Advisor
ADRA Deutschland e.V.
Email: carina.rolly@adra.de
Phone: +49 (0)152 24368607

Dominika Schneider
Advisor for Environment, Agriculture and Ecological Sustainability
Help Hilfe zur Selbsthilfe e.V.
Email: schneider@help-ev.de
Phone: +49 (0)228 91529–0

Arno Coerver
Global WASH & Environment Advisor
Malteser International
Email: arno.coerver@malteser-international.org
Phone: +49 (0)221 9822 7253

Flavia Marà
Technical Advisor Climate Action and Environment
World Vision Deutschland e.V.
Email: flavia.mara@wveu.org
Phone: +49 (0)6172 763 168

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