

HUMANITARIAN ALTERNATIVES**Anticipating uncertainty, preparing for the unknown:
humanitarian actors in the face of issues linked to climate
change**

Guillaume Devars, Julien Fouilland, François Grünewald, Thuy-Binh Nguyen et Julie Mayans • Réseau pour la prévention des risques de catastrophes (REPR)

This first article provides an overview of the issues facing humanitarian workers and points out the ambiguities that persist. Insufficient and non-binding normative frameworks do not prevent actors who, themselves, generate a significant environmental impact, from setting up their own anticipatory tools.

Over the last few years, a number of climate risk-related crisis clusters have become a perennial feature on international agendas, and importantly on those of humanitarian actors. Some of these are multirisk¹ crisis clusters, affected simultaneously by armed conflict, such as in the Sahel and the Middle East, or by both climatic risk and tectonic dynamics, such as in Central America, the Caribbean and the periphery of the Himalayas. Regardless of the specific situations, the significance of climate change is becoming increasingly central (severe droughts, violent events such as cyclones and flooding, rising water levels, etc.). Vast, densely populated areas, especially large cities in deltas, are therefore set to become major disaster areas.

For humanitarian actors, being better prepared for these situations is a major concern at the heart of an emergency which is equalled only by the speed with which each of these disaster scenarios are likely to become realities. Moreover, this will involve reducing the environmental impact of the actions implemented and conducting initiatives with a coherent approach addressing both the adaptation of populations to climate change, but also the contribution of these interventions to mitigation efforts.

In this article, we will explore how humanitarians are updating their intervention strategies and institutional practices in order to take stock of these challenges and provide a sustainable response to crises, even in emergency situations. The impact of climate change will be analysed in a wider context, incorporating conflicts, migrations, urbanisation and environmental degradation.

Climate change: the tip of the iceberg in terms of humanitarian disasters

The geographic areas where humanitarians intervene are subject to disruptions that are already visible and which are set to worsen over the coming decades, albeit in different ways. High-intensity cyclones are occurring more frequently in the Asia-Pacific region, and new cyclone

¹ François Grünewald *et al.*, Cartographie des risques non intentionnels et enjeux de résiliences, DAS, 2010.

HUMANITARIAN ALTERNATIVES

paths seem to be appearing². Furthermore, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has predicted increased stress on water resources in East Africa and more frequent flooding in Asian cities, whilst episodes of heavy rainfall in South America are likely to cause unprecedented ground movements³.

For their part, populations are not sufficiently equipped to deal with these changes, which nearly always increase the human toll of climatic hazards. In the absence of an adequate understanding and an internalisation of the risk culture within communities, few families living within these societies are able to anticipate impending shocks (torrential floods, cyclones...), receive and understand weather warnings and find refuge. These preventive actions would in any case be limited by a lack of suitably-sized protection infrastructures (shelters, evacuation routes and strategies, etc.) to cope with these growing threats.

In addition to poverty and conflict, a series of anthropogenic forcings are likely to increase the destructive potential of climatic hazards: risky developments, increasing coastal urbanisation, soil sealing, deforestation, etc. Finally, the overrepresentation of certain social groups amongst the populations exposed to disasters (particularly the elderly, people with disabilities, women, ethnic minorities, etc.) reflects the predominant role of social marginalisation in managing the consequences of disasters, including climate disasters.

Most so-called natural disasters, including climate disasters, seem to be “characteristic of a system of vulnerabilities, rather than a sudden and unexpected accident”⁴, and have origins other than hydro-meteorological hazards. Therefore, without playing down the role of climate disruptions, natural hazards should not de facto be considered as the only explanatory factors for humanitarian crises: the reasons for people’s vulnerabilities are not only environmental, but also social, economic and political⁵.

Yet, many disasters are still presented as the singular, unique and obvious consequences of climate change. As an example, the recent floods in Mozambique gave rise to a series of media reactions that highlighted the unpredictable nature of cyclone Idai and the rains that persisted in the country in the first months of the year, attributing them solely to climate change. However, these hasty analyses must not overshadow the weaknesses of community and institutional emergency preparedness, weaknesses that make the Mozambican coast structurally vulnerable to any tropical storm.

The overly simplistic communication practices that occur during many climate-related crises attract the attention of international observers, which facilitates the promotion and implementation of international solidarity projects for the benefit of the affected populations. However, these can also reveal a lack of analysis and are eventually likely to lead to the development of imperfect response strategies.

² Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), AR 5 Climate Change 2014: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability. Part A: Global and Sectoral Aspects, www.ipcc.ch/site/assets/uploads/2018/02/WGIIAR5-PartA_FINAL.pdf

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Hewitt, “The Social Construction of Disaster”; in Randolph C. Kent, *International Humanitarian Crises: two decades before/beyond*, *International Affairs*, vol.80, no.5, October 2004, p.851-869.

⁵ For example, the management of hydraulic structures can be technically deficient and insufficiently concerted, which can lead to flooding or, conversely, drastically reduce water supplies. Hence, a recent internal project evaluation carried out in 2017 by Handicap International in Pakistan, in the Sindh Province, highlighted the priority given by irrigation services to rice growing and certain populations over others, leading to flooding and droughts downstream of hydraulic structures.

HUMANITARIAN ALTERNATIVES

Intervening before, during and after crises

The challenge is especially important given that the chronic crises resulting from the structural vulnerability of certain geographical areas require multi-sectoral interventions so as to provide better coverage for the basic needs of the affected populations. The recurrence of these disasters therefore also implies a contiguum of intervention (preparedness, emergency aid, rehabilitation and development), widely supported by aid practitioners, which could enable humanitarians to offer practical measures for adapting to climate change, including in the short- and medium-terms.

The concept of linking relief, rehabilitation and development (LRRD) emerged in the 1990s when practitioners identified a gap between the end of humanitarian assistance and the advent of development assistance⁶. Since then, organisations, researchers and practitioners have sought solutions that bring together the nexus' two current components of humanitarian aid and the development of medium- and long-term sustainable actions⁷. However, despite almost thirty years of cumulative experience, a number of challenges remain⁸, especially in terms of timing (beginning actions at the right time) and early warning systems, which have become more complex with climate change.

The upheavals observed in climate forecasting models require a revision of intervention standards (shelter construction standards, new climate risk zones, alert thresholds, monitoring of new epidemics, etc.). Faced with an increase in the frequency of extreme events, but also the need to understand and interpret the uncertainty related to climate change, it is essential to strengthen the *continuum* of interventions and bridge the gap between development projects and emergency responses. In this respect, programmes of these two types of aid must be flexible enough to allow for the rapid reallocation of funds from development programmes to emergency actions or, where possible, to carry out sustainable actions from the very beginning of the emergency phase.

In this context, proactive approaches are increasingly being adopted and several tools have already been tested, such as the Start Network's "Anticipation Window"⁹, the "Early Warning Early Action"¹⁰ of the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO), the Crisis modifier and Forecast-based financing [*see inset for the last two*]. All these can be effective tools in responding to the challenges of timing and of early warning systems.

⁶ François Grünewald, *Réflexion sur les mécanismes de gestion et de financement des interventions dans les contextes de post crise*, Groupe URD, février 2010.

⁷ Claire Pirotte, Bernard Husson et François Grünewald, *Entre urgence et développement, pratiques en question*, Groupe URD, Karthala, 1997.

⁸ Ralf Otto and Lioba Weingärtner, *Linking relief and development: More than old solutions for old problems*, Policy and Operations Evaluation Department (IOB), Ministry of Foreign Affairs, The Netherlands, 2013, www.government.nl/documents/reports/2013/05/01/iob-study-linking-relief-and-development-more-than-old-solutions-for-old-problems

⁹ Start Fund Crisis Anticipation Window: <https://startnetwork.org/start-fund/crisis-anticipation-window>

¹⁰ Early Warning Early Action: www.fao.org/emergencies/la-fao-en-action/aip/fr

Crisis modifier and Forecast-based financing

The **Crisis modifier**, which is used by a number of sponsors, is a financing mechanism which enables greater flexibility and adaptability to the context. If used effectively, it can enable actors to react quickly to an anticipated or observed crisis – as a sort of hiatus to their development actions – in order to respond to the most urgent humanitarian needs and for a specified period. This tool is supported by a contingency plan and a budget that is allocated to respond to potential crises. On returning to the central question, these actors can continue to invest in projects that address the root causes of the populations' vulnerabilities in order to improve their resilience to shocks and recurrent stresses.

Forecast-based financing (FbF) is a tool developed by the International Federation of the Red Cross which allows actors to act quickly during the critical time period between early warnings and potential disasters. This tool supports activities such as the distribution of mosquito nets before heavy rains (to prevent malaria epidemics), the training of volunteer teams in first aid, or the pre-positioning of contingency plans before roads become impassable*. The key, innovative aspect of this tool is the predetermined allocation of financial resources, which saves critical time usually spent trying to obtain such financial resources for the humanitarian response. The roles and responsibilities of those participating in the implementation of actions are also predefined so as to ensure the total commitment of all stakeholders involved and to help address the ever-present challenge of coordination in crisis situations.

*See Coughlan de Perez, E. *et al.*, "Forecast-based financing: an approach for catalyzing humanitarian action based on extreme weather and climate forecasts", *Natural Hazards and Earth System Sciences*, 15(4), 2015, p.895-904, <https://www.nat-hazards-earth-syst-sci.net/15/895/2015/nhess-15-895-2015.pdf>

These proactive tools are a powerful way of rising to the challenges of rapid action. They can also be used during critical periods immediately before or directly after a disaster. Indeed, it has been demonstrated that, using these mechanisms to take account of climate information and the probability of the occurrence of intense natural hazards enables populations to begin preparatory actions so they can put together a broad range of scenarios to manage the risk of disasters.

But climate change does not only affect populations and the operations of humanitarian actors. It also involves international organisations, that must reassess their practices and set in motion the fundamental changes necessary for the overall coherence of their interventions.

Environmental "Do No Harm"

Although they are sometimes large-scale for certain crises, the projects implemented by humanitarian actors are generally limited in scope, and therefore have a lesser environmental impact than those of public or private organisations. Think for example of regional facilities (water and sanitation networks, transport, etc.), or the management of major infrastructure works (hydroelectric dams, etc.) that such public or private organisations can implement.

HUMANITARIAN ALTERNATIVES

However, the environmental impact of humanitarian actors' practices in the countries in which they intervene remains significant, both at the operational level (numerous flights, office and vehicle waste such as used oil, etc.) and at the implementation level (plastic waste from kit distributions, exploitation of local wood for building, etc.). For example, in Port-au-Prince in 2015, the 125 NGOs operating in the metropolitan area produced an average of 80 tons of waste a day (from offices, programmes, houses for expatriates)¹¹.

Moreover, there are few frameworks for humanitarian organisations. Article 8 of the Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and for humanitarian organisations (1994) calls for humanitarian actors to be held accountable for reducing the impact of their actions on the environment. The general principle of “do no harm” implies that any humanitarian action must reduce its negative impact on the environment. Finally, the Core Humanitarian Standard on Quality and Accountability (CHS, 2015) includes two commitments (3 and 9) which refer to protecting the environment. Other examples include the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)¹² 13 and 17, which aim to increase the share of renewable energy globally by 2030 and call for urgent collective action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. But none of these provisions are binding.

Moreover, humanitarian actors still too often place the humanitarian imperative above protecting the environment, arguing that their priority is to provide rapid assistance to meet the needs of suffering populations¹³. There are very few environmentally-focused institutional policies and activities likely to generate external effects that harm the environment are rarely subject to regular and systematic monitoring. Consequently, the current contribution of humanitarian practitioners to mitigating climate change can seem very limited.

Nevertheless, initiatives and new practices are emerging, often at the behest of groups of employees who are aware of the urgency and need to change such habits when they are no longer suitable or relevant. Hence, organisations publish Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) reports in which they describe their sustainable development processes by limiting or even eliminating their use of paper, reducing their energy consumption, developing specifications for sustainable purchasing, or by changing their practices (reducing air travel, travelling by train in Europe, investing in video-conference systems, etc.). Some organisations perform carbon accounting and regularly offset their unavoidable emissions for both head office and the field, green teams are created to promote environmentally-responsible practices which can impact organisational decision-making. This applies to the implementation of a Climate Smart Flight Travel policy at CARE International and the annual calculation of energy consumption and the installation of solar panels in the offices and houses of expatriates of some missions of Humanity & Inclusion (formerly Handicap International).

Alongside these initiatives are increasingly demanding sponsors (British, North American, Australian and North European) as well as aid recipients and host governments with a growing awareness of these issues. Far from being anecdotal, these events clearly herald a structural change in how humanitarian actors operate in terms of environmental management, reflecting the general awareness in our societies.

¹¹ Samantha Brangeon, *La gestion des déchets des acteurs de l'aide. Étude de cas: Haïti*, Groupe URD/CEFREPADE, février 2015, www.urd.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/RapportDechetsHumanitaires_Haiti_Version_Longue_FRdocx.pdf

¹² The 17 SDGs were adopted in 2015 by the United Nations to respond to the global challenges facing humanity, especially those linked to poverty, inequality, the climate, environmental degradation, prosperity, peace and justice.

¹³ Samantha Brangeon, *La prise en compte des enjeux environnementaux par les ONG. Étude de cas sur Humanité & Inclusion*, Groupe URD, février 2019, p. 6.

Countdown

The latest projections on the future of the planet in the face of climate change, the rapid loss of biodiversity and various sources of pollution (plastics, nano-particles, endocrine disruptors, etc.) are very worrying. Humanitarian actors, who are at the centre of disaster management, conflicts and vulnerabilities, have played an active role in leading the discussion and search for solutions, based on their constant exposure to various crisis areas.

Three main priorities have emerged; that of improving responses in terms of timing, adaptation, and appropriation by local actors, that of the coherence between practices and narratives and finally, that of the forecasting of “high-risk” future scenarios which will necessarily be accompanied by environmental emergencies and the risk of collapse.

This awareness is still recent and by no means universally shared. There are various barriers to improving the management of these challenges such as no mandatory legal framework, a lack of coordination between emergency and development and the lack of funding or lack of environmental expertise within NGOs. However, bridges have been built between Disaster Risk Reduction and Climate Change Adaptation as well as between emergency and development. Expertise is increasingly being exchanged between NGOs and scientists, and between humanitarian actors and environmentalists. But time is running out.

The five authors belong to the REseau pour la Prévention des Risques de catastrophes, a network of international solidarity actors whose objective is to develop and share good practices, as well as strengthening the expertise of member organisations in terms of disaster risk reduction and combining this with climate change adaptation. Founded in 2012, the REPR network currently includes CARE France, the French Red Cross, Solidarités International, Humanity & Inclusion (formerly Handicap International) and Groupe URD.

<https://www.urd.org/fr/reseau>

Translated from the French by Juliet Powys

Biographies

Guillaume Devars • For nearly twenty years, he held positions for the coordination and management of development projects in Africa and Latin America with organisations such as CARE, Médecins du Monde, le Secours Catholique and the United Nations. Guillaume is currently the Disaster Risk Reduction Advisor for CARE France.

Julien Fouilland • He was involved in basic research before joining the French Red Cross, then Handicap International (HI), which is now Humanity & Inclusion. Julien is currently the Disaster Risk Reduction/ Climate Change Adaptation Technical Advisor for Humanité et Inclusion. His role consists in developing more inclusive DRR strategies for highly vulnerable people.

François Grünewald • He has worked in the international aid sector for over 35 years and is currently the Executive and Scientific Director of Groupe URD, where he works on disaster management and resilience. The author of numerous articles, François has also supervised several publications, including *Entre Urgence et développement*, *Villes en guerre et guerres en ville* and *Bénéficiaires ou partenaires : quels rôles pour les populations dans l'action humanitaire ?*, both published by

Editions Karthala (see www.urd.org).

Thuy-Binh Nguyen • She has over ten years' experience in Disaster Risk Management for the Red Cross and Save the Children in Africa and Asia. Thuy-Binh is currently the Disaster Risk Reduction/Climate Change Adaptation Technical Advisor for the French Red Cross.

Julie Mayans • For the past ten years, she has worked in the food security sector in Africa, America and Asia with the NGOs Action Contre la Faim, Solidarités International, CARE, Triangle Génération Humanitaire and the International Federation of the Red Cross (IFRC). She is currently the Food Security and Livelihoods Advisor and Focal Point on DRR at the headquarters of Solidarités International.

Reproduction prohibited without the agreement of the review Humanitarian Alternatives.

To quote this article: Guillaume Devars, Julien Fouilland, François Grünwald, Thuy-Binh Nguyen and Julie Mayans, "Anticipating uncertainty, preparing for the unknown: humanitarian actors in the face of issues linked to climate change", Humanitarian Alternatives, n°11, July 2019, p.10-23,

<http://alternatives-humanitaires.org/en/2019/07/18/anticipating-uncertainty-preparing-for-the-unknown-humanitarian-actors-in-the-face-of-issues-linked-to-climate-change/>

ISBN of the article (PDF): 978-2-37704-533-4