

Humanitarian space

A network to help humanitarian organisations to take environmental issues into account more effectively: why is such a network necessary and what are its objectives?

The Humanitarian Environment Network

Created due to a common need to discuss and improve the integration of environmental considerations into humanitarian action and through the impetus given by Groupe URD and a number of other organisations, the Humanitarian Environment Network (*Réseau Environnement Humanitaire*) currently includes members of several French-speaking organisations like Action Contre la Faim, the French Red Cross, Médecins du Monde, Médecins Sans Frontières Suisse, Solidarités International, Terre des Hommes Lausanne, Triangle Génération Humanitaire, the Joint UNEP / OCHA Environment Unit and Groupe URD. This article is the first time the network has expressed itself publicly. It presents the mission and objectives that the members have fixed for themselves as well as the results of a review of progress made, remaining needs and difficulties encountered. With the foundations now in place, collective learning is underway.

The creation of the network

The multiple links between the environment and crises

Climate change, pollution, the water crisis, the gradual depletion of fossil fuels, deforestation, conflicts over resources... environmental issues increasingly affect and raise questions for humanitarian actors.

First of all, humanitarian operations themselves can have a negative impact on the natural environment due to the production of waste (used oil, medical waste, electronic waste, etc.), increased pressure on natural resources like water and wood in areas where their programmes are conducted, and greenhouse gas emissions due to the international transportation of people and equipment. Due to their activities, organisations are in the front line and able to see and testify about the consequences of environmental degradation which further reduce people's already weakened resilience. The perspective of the rising price of fuel for vehicles, electrical generators and the cold chain is forcing us to question the dependence of our programmes on this fossil resource which is being depleted in order to avoid energy becoming more and more expensive to the detriment of aid itself. More generally, increasingly scarce natural resources, including metals, indirectly affect the cost of equipment used, raising ques-

tions about consumption. Lastly, the incentives to take the environment into consideration are also external due to national regulations of both home countries and countries where operations are carried out, the changing demands of certain donors, increased awareness of both donors and partners, the development of sector-based norms for more environmentally-friendly practices, etc.

The need to move forward collectively on these issues

However, humanitarian organisations are often reticent about integrating an environmental approach at the institutional level. They give several reasons for this. For example, they argue that environmental considerations are not part of their mandate and that the environment is an issue for rich countries. They also have difficulty combining their objectives of efficiency and effectiveness with additional cross-cutting demands like the environment. They feel it is a technical area of expertise, and they sometimes do not know where to start or how to deal with it. Lastly, they do not feel sufficiently prepared to be accountable or to communicate on these issues.

Since 2010, Groupe URD and UNEP/OCHA have facilitated training courses¹ on integrating the environment in the humanitarian sector. These have been an opportunity for actors to discuss these questions and to establish this subject as an integral part of the quality approach that they have been engaged in for numerous years. It was during these training courses which were run in both western and crisis-affected countries (Chad, Afghanistan, Zimbabwe and South Africa) that organisations expressed the need to create a discussion group on this subject. Created in April 2012, the network aims to promote the integration of the environment among member organisations and more broadly throughout the humanitarian sector, by encouraging collective learning and healthy emulation via the sharing of experiences and ideas and the search for solutions to shared problems.

Collective learning

The organisation and mission of the network

The members of this network belong to organisations like Action contre la Faim (ACF), the French Red Cross, Médecins du Monde, Médecins Sans Frontières Suisse, Solidarités International, Triangle GH, Terre des Hommes

Lausanne, UNEP/OCHA and Groupe URD. The network meets for three or four half days per year, taking turns to meet in the premises of the different organisations. In order to encourage the broadest possible participation and in order to limit our carbon footprint, there is always the possibility to take part remotely via video-conference. Participants include the permanent members but also representatives of member organisations involved in the topics being discussed. New organizations are welcome to take part and join the network.

The network's mission is to promote the integration of the environment both among member organisations and throughout the humanitarian sector. In order to do this, it has given itself three objectives:

- To encourage experience sharing via a shared library (manuals, lessons learned, etc.), thematic meetings and the writing and publication of summary notes aimed at the wider sector;
- To conduct studies, develop tools which are adapted to the needs of the sector and which can be adopted by non-specialists;
- To establish the legitimacy of the network and conduct advocacy work with the directors of the member organisations and other actors, such as donors, to encourage the integration of environmental considerations throughout the sector.

As we will see in greater detail below, the first meetings allowed the members to consolidate the mission and objectives of the network and assess the current level of integration of the environment among member organisations. The following meetings were based on specific themes (such as carbon footprints and waste management). In addition to these structured meetings, each member uses the network to: share information (e.g. planning a conference which might interest the other members); get help (with contacts or know-how); and suggest bilateral discussions of a shared topic when the opportunity arises (e.g. having a member of the network make a presentation at an event), etc.

A very informative review

A review of the level of integration of the environment within member organisations of the network was carried out in late 2012 and early 2013. This study showed that member organizations have all already instigated different activities related to this topic. This is the result of awareness about a changing external context which is increasingly affecting populations and also a desire to be coherent with NGO values (principles of Do No Harm, of fairness and participatory processes) and to lead by exam-

ple. There has also been a gradual acceptance that the quality of programmes, the sustainability and autonomy aimed for, and the preservation of the natural environment are interdependent.

Changes have taken place in certain sectors, such as the reduction of the environmental impact within headquarters (recycling of waste, reduced consumption of water, energy and consumables (paper, cartridges, etc.) and greater attention given to the issue of professional travel, whether international or home to workplace travel). Certain organizations have also evaluated their carbon footprint and their dependence on fossil fuels. These have resulted in actions to reduce emissions, consumption and the production of waste. In target countries, some organisations are working on using cleaner energy and improving their energy efficiency for the production of electricity, cooking and travel. Agricultural practices which preserve the environment are also put in place such as the use of traditional seeds, irrigation techniques which use less water, agro-ecological techniques and the use of compost. Lastly, certain projects have an explicitly environmental

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component: environmental education, environmental health, watershed management or improved stoves to reduce firewood use.

Generally, however, these efforts are relatively recent. They are often the result of motivated individuals and there is still not enough institutional awareness. An environmental approach is not generalised throughout all the functions of the organisation or all its projects, but pilot projects are conducted in the field (energy, waste, environmental health, etc.). The main barriers are lack of time or skills, resistance to change within organisations and insufficient support from decision-makers (Heads of NGOs, donors) which is essential to integrate a cross-cutting issue which affects every function. Even though they often directly witness environmental impacts and the deterioration of the natural environment, and their effects on the societies concerned, there is still a lot to do to raise awareness among staff and partners in operational contexts.

According to the members of the network, several elements would help to make progress. The identification of environmental norms in the countries where operations take place and the analysis of present and potential demands from institutional and private donors would improve understanding of the context, improve preparation, and would improve positioning as a consequence. Institutional integration of the environment (i.e. via a charter or an environment policy or positioning in relation to climate change and sustainable development) is an essential pre-requisite in order to be able to make pro-

gress with concrete, long-term changes. Relatively simple measures at the headquarters level would allow impacts to be controlled and reduced². In terms of programmes, measures which can be taken include raising awareness among collaborators, providing practical solutions and techniques to improve waste management and change energy intensive practices (eco-driving techniques, reduced use of air conditioning, improved insulation of buildings, production of renewable energy), improved logistical orientation for responsible local purchasing, environmentally-friendly agricultural techniques, etc.

The first of its kind, this review provides an overview of the level of integration of environmental considerations among network members, and provides key information to guide activities, facilitate experience sharing and encourage leverage between members.

Theme-based meetings for in-depth discussion

The priority themes that were decided at the review will be tackled at theme-based meetings. During each meeting, short presentations are made by people who have experience or ideas to share on the subject. When possible, a specialist on the subject is also invited to speak. Open discussion then leads to a summary and a review of key ideas and good practices. Possible follow-up activities may also be decided. The discussions are recorded in operation-focused summary notes which are accessible on the Groupe URD website³.

The meeting which took place in May 2013 dealt with carbon/greenhouse gas emission assessments. ACF and MSF Switzerland – who have carried out assessments of part of their activities – made presentations, as did a consultant from “*Le Geste Environnemental*” research institute. The summary note which was put together after this exchange includes definitions and regulatory aspects, the specific experiences of ACF, MSF Switzerland and Groupe URD, and good practices and recommendations aimed at other organisations who would like to carry out an assessment of this kind. One of the conclusions is that it would be very useful to produce a sector-based operational guide to carrying out assessments of greenhouse gas emissions in humanitarian organisations. This could be produced by the network.

During a previous meeting, a student came to present work which she had carried out for MSF Switzerland on energy and using photovoltaic solar power in place of diesel generators in the sub-Saharan region. The last thematic meeting, which took place on 4 October, 2013 dealt with waste management, and the next meeting, planned for December, will look at environmental impact assessments.

What members get from the network

A year and a half after its first meeting, the network is resolutely engaged in carrying out the mission that it has chosen for itself. The review was an opportunity for each member to think about their own practices and how much they take the environment into account. It allowed members to look at what is already done internally, at areas which still need to be improved and adapted, and at competencies and know-how that exist in other organizations which could be useful for them.

While awareness about environmental issues and the need to take them into account is quite limited and uneven at different institutional levels, the network makes it possible to establish close contact between representatives from a variety of organisations who are active on this issue and who are sometimes relatively isolated within their own organisations. It gives them greater weight internally.

Over and above the sharing of experiences and knowledge, the existence of the network is also a source of inspiration for organisations, who see what others are doing and feel reinforced and comforted in their commitment towards more environmentally-friendly practices. Thus, for

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Antoine Delepière of Tdh Lausanne, “the network allows Tdh to compare experiences, share practices with other actors engaged in an environmental approach and integrate the lessons

learned by other actors. It also improves our advocacy position for the integration of an environmental approach with regard to the revision of our strategic plan”.

Looking ahead

Looking ahead, the network will continue to strengthen collective learning among its members, but also beyond. It will aim to incorporate new members to further increase sources of experience and competencies. If funds are mobilised, it also plans to develop tools and carry out studies to respond to the key needs of the sector in order to support organisations in their efforts to apply an environmental approach.

Lastly, the network has been approached by international actors for whom it has served as an example, notably for a network which is currently being established and led by the Joint UNEP/OCHA Environment Unit. Some of its members, such as Groupe URD, have been involved in this international network since the beginning, with the aim of

being a driving force and sharing the competencies of the French-speaking network and establishing links between the different initiatives.

*Text written by the members of the
Humanitarian Environment Network*

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¹ The partnership with UNEP has existed since 2010. Beginning in the autumn of 2013, these training courses will be run with the Joint UNEP/OCHA Environment Unit (JEU).

² For example, carrying out a carbon footprint assessment and putting in place indicators to monitor and reduce emissions, defining principles and recommendations for responsible purchasing, communicating, training, etc.

³ <http://www.urd.org/A-network-of-NGOs-committed-to>

« Action contre la Faim » and the environment

“Action contre la Faim’s objectives are access to water and the eradication of malnutrition. These will only be achieved in an environment that is preserved, so we have been concerned with environmental issues for some time. A series of studies carried out from 2009 made it possible to identify support activities, and particularly logistics, as major causes of environmental impact : greenhouse gas emissions due to transportation, the indirect impact of products and services purchased, the running of premises and what they consume, etc.

These studies led to the drawing up of an “environmental agenda” which was validated by the board of directors at the end of 2010. Via this agenda, ACF recognized the organisation’s responsibility for its direct and indirect impacts, and made five commitments: responsible purchasing, quantitatively and qualitatively improved energy consumption, controlling the environmental footprint of freight, sustainable management of waste, and communicating about these commitments and promoting them with all our partners.

Following the partial achievement of these objectives, a study was launched in autumn of 2013 to find new ways of making improvements in keeping with the priorities of the humanitarian community. The Réseau Humanitaire is both a relay and a precious source of inspiration for this objective”. *Thibault Laconde, Head of sustainable development projects, ACF*

« Terre des Hommes Lausanne » and the environment

“In its general vision of applying children’s rights at the international level, as far as possible, the Fondation Terre des hommes (Tdh) does its utmost to integrate the demands of sustainable development (including the environmental approach). Respecting children’s rights today (almost 50% of the world population) is the best guarantee of the capacity of future generations to rise to the challenges of the future in terms of survival and development.

Taking the environment into account in Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) projects is, to some extent, a way of adopting an environmental approach. Tdh’s environmental approach aims to reduce the negative impact of the organisation and its programmes, optimising the use of energy, by conserving natural cycles (carbon, nitrogen, water, minerals, etc.) and conserving evolutionary potential (biodiversity)”. *Antoine Delepière, Water, Sanitation and Hygiene Specialist, Tdh Lausanne*