

The Sidelined Cross-Cutting Issue: Mainstreaming Environment into the Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH) Cluster

Nowadays, we have mostly understood that failing to consider the environment can have serious consequences not just for the health and integrity of ecosystems but also for our own health as well as lives. Climate change or the plastic pollution of lands and oceans are prominent instances of what our collective neglect of the environment can bring about. Time and time again, environmental considerations are a mere afterthought – a ‘nice to have’, if you will. The overall balance and health of ecosystems, let alone the biosphere, tends to rarely be at the center of our thoughts and actions.

This situation is, unfortunately, also quite prevalent in the humanitarian sector where environmental concerns are not typically considered to be a key component of humanitarian assistance. It is commonly seen as an issue for the development sector instead. Admittedly, saving the lives and attending to the most basic needs of disaster affected populations is, and will always be, the priority of humanitarian assistance. However, the lack of environmental engagement within the humanitarian sector can cause substantial shortcomings in the overall quality of response efforts and even undermine the goal of saving lives in the long term.

Such shortcomings can be illustrated with various examples of past humanitarian operations. For instance, excessive deforestation for brick production during the Darfur crisis caused the destruction of livelihoods for local populations. Over-drilling for water by humanitarian organizations led to dried up local wells in Afghanistan. In Haiti, insufficient waste treatment and sanitation led to environmental contamination, causing a horrific outbreak of cholera in the country. A failure to adequately consider the environment during humanitarian crises has negative effects on local vulnerable populations and ecosystems – perhaps not immediately, but certainly in the long term!

Yet, this research shows that despite these experiences and the increasing evidence regarding the importance of addressing environmental risks, reducing the environmental impacts of humanitarian operations, and integrating environmental considerations into field work, little has changed over the past decade. Thus, the question arises as to why the environment continues to be such an underappreciated issue within the humanitarian sector.

This thesis set out to better understand the key challenges in the humanitarian sector that continue to inhibit the systematic integration of environmental concerns, which is generally referred to as

environmental mainstreaming. To limit the scope, the thesis focuses on the Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) Cluster, which is one of 11 clusters within the Cluster Approach, and is led by UNICEF. Qualitative interviews have been conducted with various WASH practitioners in different positions to capture their perspectives and opinions on the matter.

The interviews revealed that environmental concerns are clearly not at the forefront of the WASH Cluster's humanitarian assistance, despite the impact of the Cluster's work on the environment, e.g. working with water resources, sewage and waste. This lack of placing greater priority on the environment causes an absence of a clear strategy or permanent mechanism, such as dedicated environmental units, that ensures environmental mainstreaming in the humanitarian assistance. In addition, a clear environmental mainstreaming strategy is necessary to develop the tools and knowledge to aid humanitarians in the field deal with environmental concerns during crises.

While it is understandable that the environment will not become the top priority for the WASH Cluster, it is simply unacceptable to continue to sideline environmental concerns¹. Imagine you have lost everything in a disaster, and now even the environment, which provides you with clean air, water and resources for your living, is degrading. How will you sustain yourself and your family? People everywhere ultimately depend on a healthy environment and functioning ecosystems. Surely, we must fully recognize this!

But what does it take to change all this? Well, most importantly, it takes the commitment of decision-makers and donors to make the environment a greater priority and set clear requirements on how the environment is to be integrated in humanitarian assistance. For instance, minimum environmental standards, mandatory environmental requirements and guidance for field staff are needed. Funding for environmental assessments, environmental experts as well as environmental monitoring and evaluation is much more likely once there is support from the highest decision-making levels!

Theory on change management has shown that a certain *sense of urgency* is necessary to bring about change, which means that academics and practitioners alike have to continue to provide the evidence about the importance of integrating the environment into humanitarian assistance. Furthermore, we must move past artificial divisions between sectors, never disregard the long-term impacts of our actions, continue our efforts to place the environment higher up on the agenda, and always respect the ecological integrity of our planet.

¹ Just to be clear, this situation is by no means limited to the WASH Cluster only!