

TECHNICAL BACKGROUNDER

KEY MESSAGES

Nature-based Solutions in Humanitarian Contexts

November 2023

The triple planetary crisis is a humanitarian crisis

The triple planetary crisis of climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution is also a humanitarian crisis. These interrelated issues are key drivers of disasters with visible impacts globally stretching from rising sea levels in Small Island Developing States, to flooding in West Africa and Pakistan, to drought in the Horn of Africa, to wildfires in the Middle East.

Since the 1990s the number of climate and weather-related disasters has increased by 35 percent, affecting an unprecedented 1.7 billion people. Over three quarters of the land surface and a stunning four-fifths of our oceans have been altered by the direct impacts of human activities. These changes are associated with huge losses in biodiversity: wild plant and animal species are now more threatened with extinction than ever before in human historyⁱ. Reduced biodiversity means millions of people face a future where food supplies and people are more vulnerable to pests and disease, and where fresh water is in irregular or short supply.

In the face of crisis, it is the humanitarian sector who prepares for and responds to disasters. Yet, in the coming decades growing disaster risk threatens to exceed the humanitarian sector's capacity to respond to crises. The increasing severity and frequency of climate-related disasters, natural resource scarcity, environmental degradation and pollution exacerbate underlying risks, stoke conflict, and undermine humanitarian and development gains.

The triple planetary crisis impacts humanitarian response. A degraded environment can trigger or worsen a humanitarian crisis. For example, the loss of a mangrove forest can increase a community's exposure to storm surges, amplifying a cyclone's impacts. It can also make responding to a crisis more difficult.

There is a need to address these crises in a holistic manner. A siloed approach risks unintended negative consequences. Nature-based solutions are one way to increase coherence in addressing the triple planetary crises. They hold extraordinary power for increasing the resilience of social and environmental systems to disasters, crises, and climate change.

Nature-based solutions have the twin objectives of providing for human well-being and protecting the environment. They are a tangible solution that can build immediate and long-term resilience for those affected by crisis. Implementing nature-based solutions can reduce the number of people in need of international humanitarian assistance due to climate change and weather-related disasters.

Nature-based Solutions

Nature-based solutions (NbS) are "actions to protect, conserve, restore, sustainably use and manage natural or modified terrestrial, freshwater, coastal and marine ecosystems, which address social, economic and environmental challenges effectively and adaptively, while simultaneously providing human well-being, ecosystem services and resilience and biodiversity benefits."ⁱⁱ

In 2021, IFRC and ICRC established the [Climate and Environment Charter for Humanitarian Organizations](#) to step up its commitment to address the climate and environmental crises. IFRC's Plan and Budget 2021-2025 also includes a target for 100 National Societies to be implementing nature-based solutions for climate change adaptation, mitigation and disaster risk reduction. Finally, in 2022, IFRC established the [Global Climate Resilience Platform](#) to catalyze USD 1 billion of new and innovative finance, increase the climate resilience, and build the adaptation skills, of 500 million people in the most climate-vulnerable countries. One of the focus areas of the platform is nature-based solutions.

It is urgent that all step up their efforts to address the climate and environmental crises. **IFRC is highlighting five key messages on nature-based solutions to strengthen climate and disaster resilience in humanitarian programmes and operations.**

1

We must adopt a 'do no harm' approach to both people and the environment.

While the need to protect and save lives is the foremost focus of humanitarian response, in certain circumstances to ensure the protection of lives and livelihoods, there is a need to consider the environment. Indeed, a healthy environment is a human right: In July 2022, The UN General Assembly adopted a resolution on the right to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment ⁱⁱⁱ.

The environment is the surroundings or conditions in which a person, animal, or plant lives or operates. It encompasses all the natural world that is the complex of physical, chemical, and biotic factors (such as climate, soil, and living things) that act upon an organism or an ecological community and ultimately determine its form and survival.

However humanitarian operations can damage the environment, exacerbating underlying vulnerability and risk (see Figure 1). For example, deforestation on slopes surrounding a refugee camp can create an increased risk of landslides, putting lives in danger.

The *Climate and Environment Charter for Humanitarian Organizations* notes that in line with the principle of "do no harm", humanitarian actors must avoid, minimize, and manage the damage we cause to the environment and the climate, while maintaining our ability to provide timely and principled humanitarian assistance^{iv}. Recognizing this humanitarian principle of 'do no harm', humanitarian operations need to integrate environmental considerations in planning for response. Adopting a "green response"^v is essential.

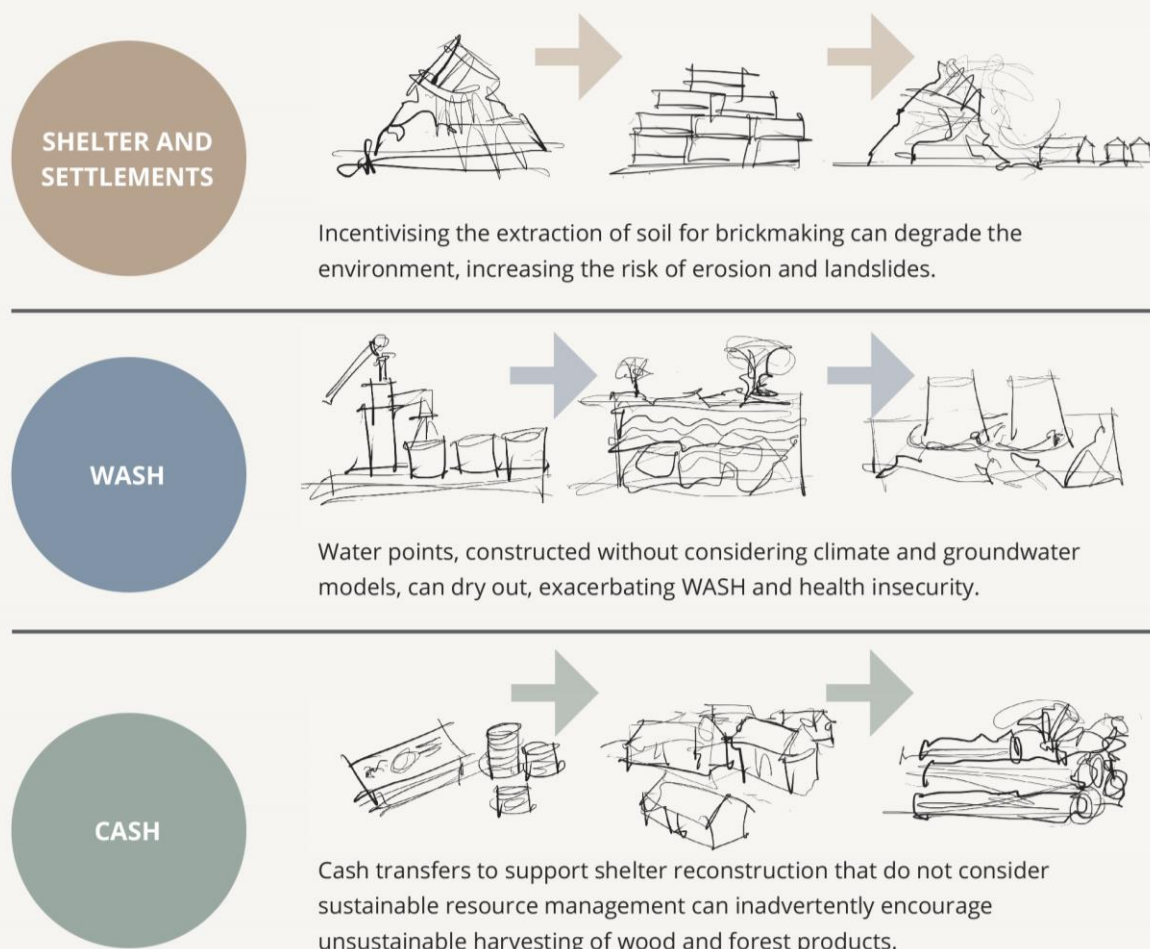
But more needs to be done by humanitarian operations to ensure environmental safeguarding. Humanitarians have a duty to ensure communities and people affected by crisis are not negatively affected and are more prepared, resilient, and less at-risk as a result of humanitarian action.

A UNEP assessment^{vi} of post-tsunami aid to Aceh showed that the lack of environmental considerations in post-tsunami aid programming – for example through contamination of groundwater through emergency latrine construction, use of unsustainable building materials and inadequate siting of housing – undermined the sustainability of interventions and the long-term resilience of communities.

While some donor countries require certain minimum environmental actions to be undertaken in humanitarian operations^{vii} there is currently no globally agreed minimum standard on environment in humanitarian contexts. Indeed, there is no operational guidance on how to implement a do no harm approach.

Furthermore, in the context of a changing climate, recovery can also be an opportunity to adapt to climate change by implementing measures that reduce exposure and vulnerability to climate and weather-related hazards. This requires risk reduction measures to be designed using the best available information about how potential climate change scenarios will likely impact exposure to weather and climate-related hazards. To achieve the overlapping aims of disaster risk reduction and climate change adaptation during recovery, it may be helpful to introduce legal provisions requiring that post-event recovery plans identify measures, including environmental measures, to reduce disaster risk and adapt to climate change across sectors.

Figure 1: The implications of not considering the environment (Source: Sphere, 2023)



2

We need to work more with nature to reduce disaster risk.

The triple planetary crisis leave us with no option but to change how we reduce risk and manage crisis. Traditionally, in disaster management the emphasis has been on post-disaster response and pre-disaster preparedness activities. Furthermore, response efforts have typically been focused on short-term needs. Few humanitarian planning documents fully analyze disaster-related risks and the impact of climate in humanitarian settings. Very few humanitarian appeals include disaster risk reduction or climate adaptation efforts. With protracted crises typically making up 80% of the humanitarian portfolio it is important to address root causes of humanitarian needs.

Saving lives must remain the top priority for emergency operations. However, the environment and humanitarian aid are inherently interconnected, and by rethinking how we work with nature – before, during, and after disasters and crises – we can build the immediate and long-term resilience for both affected people and the environment.

As part of a broader set of “green” solutions, nature-based solutions can reinforce and contribute to the humanitarian objectives of addressing human suffering and protecting lives. Nature-based solutions can contribute to the environmental responsibility of humanitarian action at multiple stages and reinforce the humanitarian objectives of addressing human suffering and protecting lives.

While environmental considerations that support nature-based solutions can be incorporated at all stages of disaster management, nature-based solutions are particularly relevant during prevention, protracted crises, and recovery:

- Nature-based solutions are particularly relevant during **prevention and preparedness**, as well-managed ecosystems provide critical services that reduce risk and help people adapt to a changing climate and at the same time support climate change mitigation by increasing carbon sinks.
- **Recovery** also provides the opportunity to use nature-based solutions to ‘build back better’ by reconstructing sustainable livelihoods based on healthy ecosystems. This contributes to longer-term disaster risk reduction and sustainable development, directly contributing to the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction.
- Nature-based solutions can also be implemented in **protracted crises situations**, such as in refugee camps, to improve health and well-being.

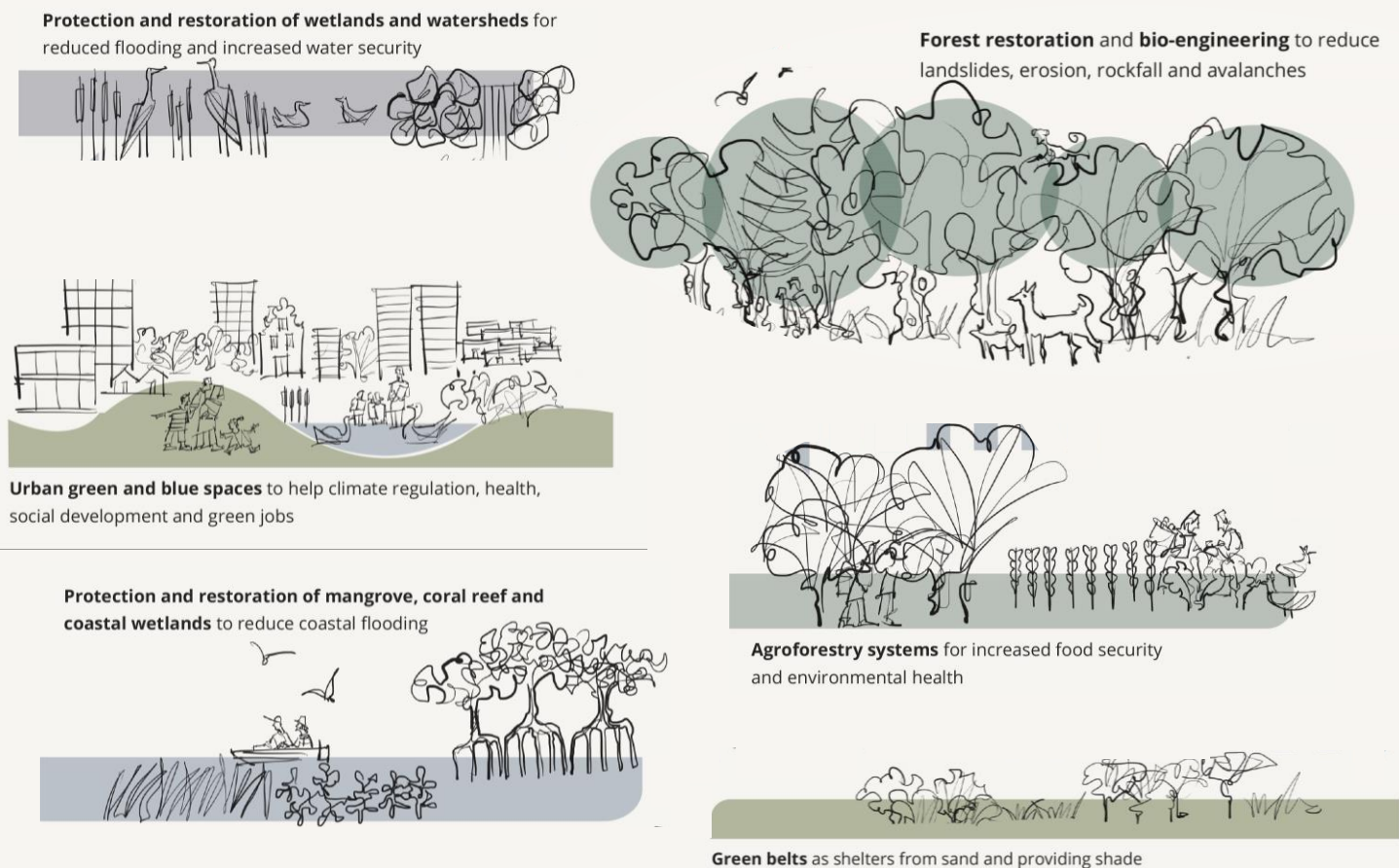
Recent case studies have shown that humanitarian actors can integrate both environmental safeguarding and nature-based solutions to help enhance the safety, dignity and rights of people, and avoid exposing them to harm.

Nature-based solutions provide critical social, economic, and physical protection benefits that contribute to doing so. Furthermore, the multiple benefits that nature-based solutions provide are particularly relevant for humanitarian contexts. These benefits are directly tied to the work of key humanitarian clusters, including food security and nutrition; livelihoods; water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH); and health, as well as other cross-sectoral linkages.

The [Sphere Unpacked Guide on Nature-based Solutions for Climate Resilience in Humanitarian Action](#) provides practical guidance for using the Sphere standards when implementing nature-based solutions in different humanitarian contexts and during the different disaster risk management phases (Figure 2).

Thus, nature-based solutions help integrate the environment into humanitarian action, as a means to alleviate suffering in humanitarian contexts and prevent future harm. Further they offer a transformative opportunity to shift assistance from short-term, small-scale responses towards long-term, landscape-scale responses that integrate environmental measures to increase the climate resilience of affected people.

Figure 2: Examples of Nature-based Solutions in Humanitarian Contexts (Source: Sphere 2023)



3

Locally-led nature-based solutions for climate change action and disaster risk reduction are crucial for equity and effectiveness.

Local communities are at the frontlines of the climate crisis. This is especially true in the Global South, where communities are suffering disproportionate impacts and also where communities are often most reliant on natural resources for their livelihoods. Nature-based solutions can be an essential component of providing protection to local communities from climate change impacts (averting loss and damage) while also slowing further warming (minimizing loss and damage), together with supporting biodiversity and providing ecosystem services. A recent report by IFRC and WWF, has indicated that Nature-based solutions have the potential to reduce the intensity of climate change and weather-related hazards by at least 26%^{viii}.

However, in the absence of well-designed and inclusive environmental policies, efforts to tackle climate change can have unintended consequences for the livelihoods of certain groups, including by placing a higher financial burden on poor households.

Similarly, initiatives designed in the absence of collaboration with beneficiaries and affected communities can have negative impacts on lives and livelihoods. Communities bring unique perspectives, skills, and a wealth of knowledge to the challenge of strengthening resilience and addressing climate change, as well as historical and current knowledge on their natural resources. The IPCC AR 6 report, recognizes the value of diverse forms of knowledge such as scientific, Indigenous and local knowledge in building climate resilience^{ix}. Indigenous Peoples and local communities (IPLCs) should be engaged as partners in resilience-building rather than being regarded merely as beneficiaries.

Nature-based solutions inherently address these social impacts if they follow the IUCN Global Standard for Nature-based Solutions^{TMx} and are implemented at the grassroots level.

4

Cross-sectoral partnerships across the climate/environment-development-humanitarian nexus are crucial for delivering a holistic approach to resilience.

Nature-based solutions are cross-sectoral because nature impacts and is impacted by many sectors. In particular when it comes to ensuring resilience it is especially important to ensure alignment and coherence between disaster risk management, climate change adaptation, and environmental laws, policies and plans. This includes the National DRR Strategy, the National Adaptation Plan and/or the National Adaptation Programme of Action. There should also be strong collaboration and coordination between the authorities responsible for disaster risk reduction and climate change adaptation.

Mainstreaming requires joint actions, coordinated efforts and greater collaboration from various stakeholders and actors from policy, governance, finance and science spheres. Partnerships are crucial to break down barriers in terms of technology, culture, or socioeconomic and across different thematic areas for the successful uptake of nature-based solutions approach at local and global levels.

Undertaking nature-based solutions in the humanitarian sector is no different. Expertise is required to integrate environment into humanitarian contexts, from undertaking assessments to designing nature-based solutions. Furthermore, the **time-scale** of working with nature is longer than humanitarian operations.

Therefore, it is essential to create partnerships between environmental, government, and humanitarian organisations to provide expertise and act as a bridge between humanitarian operations and development.

5

There is a lack of financing for nature-based solutions for disaster risk reduction and climate change adaptation.

Globally, the financing gap for nature is approximately \$230 billion USD per year. By 2030 it is estimated to increase to \$330 billion USD.^{xi}

While there is increasing recognition for the need for increased finance for nature-based solutions, siloed approaches to project funding can hamper innovative practices in humanitarian contexts. Accelerated financing for nature-based solutions, particular for those that advance climate change adaptation and disaster risk reduction, is required. This will help close the gap between disaster response and development work.

There is also a need to invest in technical and operational skills and knowledge exchanges. Public, private, and blended finance can all play an important role in scaling up nature-based solutions investments that incorporate just transition principles, safeguarding human rights, and that enable the implementation of nature-based solutions across the development-humanitarian nexus and the disaster management continuum.

This Technical Backgrounder, along with the companion **Nbs in Humanitarian Contexts Key Messages Summary**, can be found on the IFRC's [Nature-based Solutions website](#).

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ⁱ Pörtner, Hans-Otto, et al. (2021). [IPBES-IPCC co-sponsored workshop report on biodiversity and climate change \(Version 2\)](#)

ⁱⁱ [UNEA 5.5](#)

ⁱⁱⁱ [UNGA 2022 Resolution](#)

^{iv} [Climate Charter](#)

^v <https://www.ifrc.org/our-work/disasters-climate-and-crises/green-response>

^{vi} [UNEP \(2007\) Environment and reconstruction in Aceh: two years after the tsunami](#)

^{vii} E.g. [DG ECHO's minimum environmental requirements and recommendations](#)

^{viii} [WWF-IFRC, 2022. Working with Nature to Protect People](#)

^{ix} [IPCC 2022. Summary for Policy Makers](#)

^x [IUCN, 2020 Global Standard for Nature-based Solutions](#)

^{xi} [UNEP, 2022. The state of finance for Nature](#)