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Build Back Greener: Climate Change & Humanitarian Response

By Margareth Sembiring and Alistair D. Cook

Synopsis

Humanitarian response traditionally provides relief and protection to a population affected by conflict or natural disaster. Environmental considerations and climate change adaptation however have yet to be fully integrated into humanitarian action frameworks.

Commentary

THE WORRYING trend of increasing frequency and severity of climate-induced disaster events in recent years provides the basis for humanitarian response to be more sensitive and attentive to climate change adaptation efforts. After all, the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030 calls for “enhancing disaster preparedness for effective response and to “Build Back Better” in recovery, rehabilitation and reconstruction”. This sets the tone for humanitarian action to look beyond short-term relief and take an active role in building the climate resilience of the affected communities.

Although the need to consider the environment is largely uncontested among humanitarian agencies, implementation remains elusive. Notable efforts to push the environment agenda into humanitarian work have been jointly made by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) and the United Nations Environment Programme.

From Response to Development

Established in 1994, the Joint Environmental Unit (JEU) works not only in the areas of emergency response and preparedness, but also in integrating environment into

humanitarian action. The mainstreaming of the environment in humanitarian response has yet to gain as much traction although some initiatives have been made in Sudan and the Philippines. In both countries, Environmental Field Advisers were specifically deployed to assist local OCHA offices to craft environmentally-resilient humanitarian action.

One of the possible factors that explain the slow uptake of the environment agenda in humanitarian action is the longstanding bifurcated debate on the balance between short-term humanitarian response and longer term development. Environmental concerns in general and climate change adaptation in particular, are usually perceived to have more relevance to climate change and have thus far fallen mostly within the realm of a national government's responsibilities.

Such a paradigm needs to change as response and reconstruction following a disaster event will lay the groundwork for the future life and development of the affected community. While *Build Back Better* as called for in the Sendai Framework clearly espouses this idea, *Build Back Greener* can seamlessly contribute to this framework by incorporating environment considerations in humanitarian action. *Build Back Greener* can be the pathway for climate change adaptation measures to be planted in humanitarian response, and it further adds weight to the Do No Harm commitment that binds the Humanitarian Principles together.

Greening Humanitarian Response

Greening humanitarian action is loosely defined as conducting humanitarian response in an environmentally-friendly manner by being mindful of the repercussions of relief efforts on the environment. This low-hanging fruit approach includes, among others, ensuring waste generated from humanitarian response does not pollute the environment; and choosing materials with a lower carbon footprint to reconstruct damaged buildings.

The greening humanitarian response is part of the JEU's online course materials that aims to sensitise the wider humanitarian community of Greening Humanitarian Response. More recently, the environmentally-friendly approach has begun to find its application in energy provision to an affected population.

In 2015, a Chatham House report found that unsustainable energy use by a displaced community can be improved through the provision of cleaner and more modern technology. A concrete example of this approach was evidenced in the aftermath of Typhoon Haiyan where the Energy Research Institute at Nanyang Technological University (ERI@N) developed a project to provide renewable energy to typhoon-affected communities.

Challenges and Way Forward

Ensuring a smooth transition from short-term relief to long-term development will be enabled by a climate-sensitive humanitarian response and climate-resilience building. For this to happen a mindset shift is needed. In its report published in 2014, the JEU highlights that the environment element has to be systematically integrated into the policy, practice, and funding of humanitarian action.

Such thinking, however, is still absent in Southeast Asia. In ASEAN, investments in regional visions to implement plans of action for the forthcoming decade are in line with global commitments. However, the Work Programme 2016–2020 under AADMER, the ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response, does not incorporate specific environment and climate change adaptation considerations for response efforts.

While it does recognise the urgency of integrating climate change adaptation and disaster risk reduction, and tasks the National Disaster Management Office to play the lead role, the context, however, seems to be within a pre-disaster setting, and has yet to extend to a humanitarian response situation.

The ASEAN Vision 2025 on Disaster Management does make broad calls for a fresh mandate to be granted to the Secretary-General to champion disaster risk reduction and climate change adaptation across the three ASEAN Communities, establish a more comprehensive disaster management financing, and provide a coherent link between different aspects of disaster management and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

One ASEAN One Response

Located in a disaster-prone region, ASEAN member states have experienced multiple major-scale disaster events. The need to assist each other in a disaster situation was first recognised in the ASEAN Declaration on Mutual Assistance on Natural Disasters 1976. In 2011 the AHA Centre was established and its response to Typhoon Haiyan in 2013 was the first litmus test of its operational effectiveness and efficiency. ASEAN's recently-agreed 'One ASEAN One Response' approach seeks to bring different components together.

As ASEAN's collective response is still a work-in-progress, greening humanitarian action remains in its infancy. In the face of the core humanitarian need to provide immediate relief and protection to an affected community, environmental concerns can easily come second or third in priority. While efforts to initiate greening humanitarian response are underway, it is important not to lose sight of the ultimate one-step-ahead climate-sensitive Build Back Greener goal.

Adapting to climate change is more challenging than greening initiatives as it needs to take account of future climate events in its bid to build preparedness and resilience. Against this backdrop, engagement with the scientific community becomes critical.

As science and technology are often able to offer solutions to projected climate scenarios, dialogue between scientists and humanitarian actors will enable the formulation of climate-sensitive humanitarian response strategies and approaches. This way, humanitarian response will move beyond only greening its operations to being the first actors in building climate resilience in the aftermath of disasters.

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