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## **Time for Change: Climate Considerations and Humanitarian Civil-Military Coordination**

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### **SYNOPSIS**

*Climate change has implications for all sectors. One would expect disaster response to be at the forefront of integrating climate considerations, but efforts remain slow. **ALISTAIR D. B. COOK** argues that a closer look at the humanitarian civil-military community shows a sector ripe for change.*

### **COMMENTARY**

Militaries are often deployed in some capacity as part of disaster response. These deployments usually focus on specific supporting roles from engineering to logistics and medicine. As climate change becomes a higher priority across all sectors, militaries recognise its impact on their operations and vice versa but have not yet fully committed to and implemented the necessary changes.

Militaries tend to focus on supply chain resilience, resilience of military bases, sustainable fuels and technological advances to reduce carbon footprints. Much less attention is focused on how climate change impacts humanitarian civil-military coordination where a host of NGOs, civilian government agencies and militaries work together in disaster response. This should be an obvious area for climate change efforts.

## Structured but Stagnant?

Humanitarian organisations, militaries, and civilian government agencies all operate in the same space during emergencies and disasters. The United Nations has for over 30 years attempted to structure and regularise dialogue between these entities ahead of emergencies and disasters to improve response efforts by upholding humanitarian principles, minimising duplication and competition, improving communication and information sharing, and increasing standards.

This often means attending workshops or meetings like the Regional Consultative Group (RCG) on Humanitarian Civil-Military Coordination in the Asia-Pacific, exercises like Exercise Coordinated Response (Ex COORES), and training sessions to familiarise new recruits and refresh seasoned responders with humanitarian principles, coordination mechanisms, potential emergency and disaster scenarios; networking with other sector and country representatives outside of a disaster setting; and reflecting on past experiences to improve the overall response effort. This effort was formalised in the United Nations system as Civil-Military Coordination (CMCoord).



A senior-leaders discussion during the Regional Consultative Group (RCG) on Humanitarian Civil-Military Coordination for Asia and the Pacific, Singapore, 2017. Such meetings are part of the United Nations' Civil-Military Coordination (CMCoord) and remain essential for engaging various stakeholders as well as bolstering emergency and disaster response, though more can still be done to incorporate climate considerations into CMCoord's guidelines. *Image by DVIDS.*

Many of the CMCoord guidelines and standard operating procedures, such as the Oslo Guidelines and APC-MADRO Guidelines, were developed in the 1990s and 2000s. Over the past 15 years, the international system has evolved in many directions with regional and local organisations playing an increasingly important role, diversifying the space. There is also greater recognition of climate impacts and the role of humanitarian actors in reducing pollution, preventing biodiversity loss, and adapting to and mitigating climate change. However, guidelines and standard operating procedures have not sufficiently (if at all) incorporated such a role and climate considerations into humanitarian civil-military operations.

## **Challenges to Change**

Given the increasingly fragile and fragmented international system, it is unsurprising that many actors are unwilling to contemplate reform for fear of unravelling the progress made during more cooperative times. This is particularly true at the operational level in forums where suggested changes to guidance and procedure are often perceived as a threat to established practice, reluctance due to deference to higher-level officials, or simply viewed as too time consuming especially if it ends up making the system worse. The trade-offs in this view are simply too great. It is easy to slip into variations of inaction with such pessimism about world affairs.

Rather than seeing the humanitarian space as a by-product of another time, it should be viewed as an avenue for cooperation and change. It is in the area of disaster response that countries and sectors come together to provide humanitarian assistance to those most in need. It is therefore an avenue where bold changes should be made to meet the challenges of today and to demonstrate possibilities of cooperation in action. The CMCoord space offers an opportunity for humanitarian organisations, militaries, and civilian government agencies to learn from one another's experiences. One such example is the progress made to address the challenges of climate change.

## **Charting Climate Change Commitments**

At the 33rd International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent in December 2019, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the International Federation of the Red Cross (IFRC), and several National Societies committed to develop a charter to support and promote greater climate action across the humanitarian community. Over the following year and a half, the Red Cross Movement developed the Climate and Environment Charter for Humanitarian Organisations, which was launched in May 2021 with 25 signatories. Today the charter has 380 signatories from the humanitarian community. The charter recognises that "climate and environmental crises are humanitarian crises, threatening the future of humanity" and sends a clear signal that humanitarian organisations have a key role in being part of the solution.

The charter includes seven commitments to guide climate action in the humanitarian sector. These include commitments to help people adapt to climate change, maximise sustainability, embrace local leadership, increase climate knowledge, work collaboratively, use sectoral influence to increase climate change awareness, and develop targets to measure progress. It is unclear why the charter is limited to signatories from NGOs that provide humanitarian assistance and/or protection. However, those that fall outside of this, such as governments and the private sector, can sign up as supporters of the charter.

## **Implications for Humanitarian CMCoord**

The diversity of the emergency and disaster response community provides an opportunity for signatories to share charter commitments and their implications for humanitarian CMCoord with a wider audience of stakeholders.

First, stakeholders should enhance needs-based assessments to include climate and environmental impacts and provide a toolkit to do so. Second, stakeholders should map the environmental impacts of civilian and military assistance in disaster relief operations. Third, stakeholders should support the participation of affected communities in nature-based solutions to build back better and provide transformative humanitarian assistance and disaster relief. Fourth, the CMCoord community should improve the sharing of relevant climate and environmental data and enhance assessments by including climate and environmental impacts through tailored training, exercises, and partnerships.

The above suggestions provide the humanitarian civil-military community with the opportunity to review existing guidelines and standard operating procedures with climate change and the environment in mind. It is important for guidelines and standard operating procedures to remain living documents that are periodically reviewed and updated. If they are not, then they will become increasingly irrelevant, be ignored, or junked completely. It is past time that the Oslo Guidelines and APC-MADRO Guidelines undergo a systematic review to see if they remain fit for purpose.

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