

DG ECHO's approach to reducing the environmental footprint of humanitarian aid

Introduction

From climate change and disasters to conflicts and even pandemics, the environment lies at the very heart of some of the most complex and pressing issues of our time. Environmental degradation, deforestation, desertification, soil erosion and pollution can also lead to significant and protracted humanitarian crises. Climate change and other socio-economic pressures will likely worsen the situation. However, proactively addressing environmental issues, starting from the early phases of emergency response through to the recovery phase, can reduce these risks and reduce vulnerability.

As the environmental crisis deepens, humanitarian actors, from donors to local volunteers, are faced with a collective responsibility to ensure that their work does not further contribute to deteriorating the environment people live in and rely on for their livelihoods and, ultimately, their health and well-being. **This calls for taking all necessary measures to reduce the climate and environmental footprint of humanitarian aid.** As a major donor of humanitarian assistance, the European Commission has a critical role to play to make change happen.

The [2007 European Consensus on Humanitarian Aid](#) calls for the integration of environmental considerations in humanitarian aid sectoral policies and interventions, even short-term emergency ones, based on the 'do no harm' principle – a principle for taking into consideration the negative effects of aid. DG ECHO has implemented various initiatives to this end over the years. Yet up until now, a comprehensive approach to reducing the environmental footprint of DG ECHO's humanitarian aid operations, and by extension that of its partners, had not been established.

By establishing an ambitious position on reducing the environmental impact of its humanitarian aid operations, DG ECHO is aligning its actions with the principles of [the European Green Deal](#). Climate neutrality, climate resilience, circular economy, zero pollution and biodiversity protection are key pillars of the European Green Deal (Figure 1). Integrating environmental considerations in DG ECHO's humanitarian aid operations and those of its partners can contribute to addressing all of those key pillars.



Figure 1

The environmental impact of humanitarian aid

The terms “environmental footprint” or “environmental impact” refer to all negative impacts of humanitarian aid on the environment, including through its carbon footprint (both direct and indirect carbon emissions).

Impacts on the environment – related either to the disaster itself, or to the ensuing humanitarian activity – are often viewed as secondary to the humanitarian imperative. This has often inadvertently resulted in environmental degradation and sometimes destruction, impeding the recovery of affected and vulnerable populations and host communities who depend on natural resources for their livelihoods, with negative and long-term impacts on their lives, and on ecological systems as a whole.

The possible negative impacts can occur at different levels, ranging from the global (e.g. CO₂ emissions of fleet) to the local (e.g. local plastic pollution or deforestation), with impacts that can be direct (e.g. groundwater pollution) or indirect (e.g. suppliers’ manufacturing practices), and short- or long-term. Environmental impacts can be cross-sectoral, as is the case for logistics, the supply chain and cash transfer programmes, or they can be sector-specific (Shelter, WASH, Health, etc.). More details can be found in the [Environmental Footprint of Humanitarian Assistance - Scoping Review](#) from Groupe URD, commissioned by DG ECHO.

Principles that DG ECHO will follow

As an overarching principle, **negative impacts on the environment should be avoided, and where this is not possible, mitigating measures to reduce the potential negative environmental impact should be implemented, applying a precautionary approach.** The commitment to reducing the environmental footprint of humanitarian aid will guide DG ECHO’s own actions and cooperation with partners. Environmental impacts should be addressed at both the organisational and project-level.

DG ECHO will apply a **‘mainstreaming’ approach**, meaning that environmental impacts should be mitigated across projects, programmes and the organisation itself to the extent possible. As such, earmarking of funds for environmental projects will not be introduced.

Many existing sustainable solutions do not require additional investments but rather a new way of working and a different approach to planning interventions. As such, taking action should not be hindered by budget constraints.



Nevertheless, DG ECHO recognises that sometimes the sustainable alternatives are also costlier, particularly if the items purchased are of higher quality. An open dialogue will be undertaken with partners in the coming months to identify the financing needs for different requirements.

DG ECHO considers the following as key areas of intervention for projects and programmes: providing clean energy solutions, avoiding deforestation, avoiding plastic where possible, implementing a robust waste management system, choosing materials with a lower carbon footprint, greening the organisation's logistics or supply chain, and working more closely with local actors to decrease intercontinental transport.

DG ECHO will promote tools for how to address environmental impacts of projects and programmes (see Annex 1).

In its discussions with partners, as well as other donors, DG ECHO will seek to exchange good practices and discuss how to move forward together in reducing the environmental footprint of the humanitarian aid sector. A general discussion with all partners on the matter will also be taking place yearly to take stock of progress and voice concerns.

It is important to note that, although connected, climate change adaptation and climate resilience are not the same as reducing the environmental footprint of humanitarian aid. DG ECHO will contribute to increasing climate resilience through other means, for example DG ECHO's Disaster Preparedness Approach, where one of its funding priorities for 2021-2024 is "Climate and environmental resilience".

Way forward over the next years

DG ECHO will address the environmental impacts of humanitarian aid through a combination of policy and operational approaches. DG ECHO will also implement measures to 'green' its own premises and staff behaviour, in Brussels as well as in the field.

The actions can therefore be divided into: 1) DG ECHO policies (e.g. the Framework Partnership Agreement, the Single Form, HIPs and the HIP Thematic Annex, Operational Guidance documents, thematic policies); 2) Requirements for partners for reducing their environmental footprint, and 3) 'Greening' of HQ and field offices.



In doing so, DG ECHO will apply a “phased approach”, starting with recommendations, followed by setting minimum requirements, to finally setting stronger requirements once partners’ and DG ECHO’s capacity is built-up (Figure 2). These would ultimately determine eligibility of projects for funding and influence eligibility for becoming and remaining an ECHO partner. **The timeline below sets out a vision and an ambition rather than a prescriptive agenda.**



Figure 2. **Indicative** timeline for the way forward

Current situation: Actions already underway:

In 2021, partners will be asked to report in the Single Form and through the revised Resilience Marker on how possible negative environmental impacts of the project are avoided or mitigated in the project design and implementation. For the time being, partners’ answers will not weigh into the overall score or determine whether a project is eligible for funding, however in the selection of proposals, when two proposals are rated equal, priority will be given to the one that includes a reference to addressing environmental impacts.

To build up partners’ knowledge and capacity in the area, an online training module and virtual classroom courses on how to address the environmental impacts of projects and programmes will be added to the learning and training function for partners.

Stronger references to reducing environmental impacts of humanitarian aid are being included in the geographical and policy Humanitarian Implementation Plans (HIPs) and annexes but without introducing any requirements for the time being.

The ‘greening’ of the offices and staff behaviour in the DG ECHO Field Network is also already underway. Whilst initiatives concerning DG ECHO in headquarters must be within the larger Commission framework for buildings’ policy or office management, the responsibility to take this agenda forward in the ECHO field network rests entirely within DG ECHO’s remit.



Higher ambition: Actions in the medium term (1-2 years):

Project-level:

In the course of 2021, DG ECHO will develop minimum requirements for partners in priority areas where readily available solutions can provide the greatest environmental benefits. These minimum requirements will be agreed upon in consultation with experts and partners. Potential priority areas include providing clean energy solutions, avoiding deforestation, avoiding plastic where possible, implementing a robust waste management system, choosing materials with a lower carbon footprint, greening the organisation's logistics or supply chain, and working more closely with local actors to decrease intercontinental transport. This would be further detailed in the geographical and policy Humanitarian Implementation Plans (HIPs) and annexes.

By around Q4 2021, a thematic policy document on the environment in humanitarian action would be published, setting out requirements and thereby determining the level of compliance expected from partners and their weight in project allocation. Environmental considerations would be gradually included in all thematic policies, starting with those currently under development (logistics policy) or those to be revised in the future.

These requirements would start to apply from the 2022 HIPs on a voluntary basis. From 2023 onwards they will be mandatory and as such, answers regarding these priority areas in the Single Form and Resilience Marker would weigh into the appraisal of projects – but would not determine eligibility for funding for the time being.

In the course of 2021, stronger requirements¹ will be piloted with Programmatic Partners in the agreed-upon priority areas in order to explore implementation for all partners in the future.

Organisational-level:

The conditions for becoming a partner would remain unchanged; however, requirements for funding allocations would be strengthened, giving more weight to partners having environmental safeguards in place, both at their headquarters and in the field. Close dialogue would also take place with strategic International Organisations, NGO partners and UN bodies to discuss the reduction of environmental impact more strategically.

'Greening' DG ECHO:

In recognition of its own significant contribution to the environmental footprint of humanitarian aid, DG ECHO will implement an ambitious policy to "green" the ECHO field network and headquarters in Brussels. Measures will include sound environmental management of offices in terms of energy, water, waste, and procurement, limiting staff travel where possible and prioritising virtual meetings and conferences², bearing in mind that some field missions cannot be replaced by virtual meetings. Colleagues at headquarters and in the field will undergo mandatory training on how to make their daily professional activities more sustainable.

¹ For example: "Clean energy sources, with a preference for renewable energy sources, are provided in programmes that require energy provision – primarily food assistance, WASH, shelter and settlements."

² 50% of the European Commission's greenhouse gas emissions come from staff and visitors' missions and commuting to and from work. Source: Feasibility and Scoping Study for the Commission to Become Climate Neutral By 2030, Ramboll, 2020 (in press).

Full ambition: Actions in the long term (4+ years)

A decision to increase the ambition would be taken only after taking stock of progress made and assessing the capacity of partners and DG ECHO.

The long-term ambition of DG ECHO is to address all environmental impacts at both the local and global level, to the extent possible given the existing state-of-play and possible trade-offs between approaches. These should include impacts from the activities of DG ECHO's partners, including those outsourced or sub-contracted, and from any of DG ECHO's own activities.

Project-level:

As an over-arching requirement, partners would have to conduct environment impact screenings of their planned projects and programmes and introduce appropriate mitigation measures for the potential environmental impacts (local and global) into the project/programme design in order to be funded – explaining this through the Single Form. Cross-cutting environmental requirements would also be set through the HIPs, HIP Thematic Policy Annex and the Single Form, building on the already existing minimum requirements. As new solutions are developed and more research is available, these requirements will continue to be revised, in consultation with partners.

In the long term, partners would be required to calculate carbon emissions for global programmes and projects, reduce them to the extent possible, and offset those that could not be further reduced through certified carbon offsetting programmes.

Organisational-level:

Under a future call for expression of interest for NGO certification, potential NGO partners would be required to have in place environmental policies or environmental management systems of their own. This would be checked in the Ex-Ante Assessment. Existing partners would be required to upgrade their policies too at some point. Strategic International Organisations and programmatic NGO partners would in turn be expected to have a corporate commitment, sound policies and operational guidance in place to reduce their environmental impact.

'Greening' DG ECHO:

DG ECHO's own environmental management policy for HQ and the field network would match this ambition. A system would be developed to monitor the carbon footprint of staff missions from HQ and the field, and that of any external guests whose missions are paid for by the European Commission. These carbon emissions would then be offset. Additionally, the European Commission as a whole is committed to becoming climate neutral by 2030 – this includes DG ECHO.



Support from DG ECHO

Given the relatively limited prospects for providing budget support for the development of this approach in the current financial context, it is key to build up partners' capacity, rather than create a dependence on continuous funding for environmental measures.

DG ECHO will therefore support partners in building their capacity to mitigate the environmental impact of humanitarian response, starting with the development of an online training module and virtual classroom courses for DG ECHO partners. Additionally, a compendium of best practices and support tools, with advice on how to use them, will be published by the beginning of 2021. Furthermore, more focussed training (webinars) based on this compendium will be explored.

To support green innovation in the sector, large-scale innovative or study/assessment projects could be funded to pilot different solutions.

Technical support to partners would also come in the form of dedicated thematic experts in the field, recruited gradually. The commitment to operationalising the humanitarian-development nexus would also be used to harness the environmental expertise found in the development sector (both in the field and beyond) to the benefit of humanitarian actors.



Annex 1 – Tools in support of addressing environmental concerns in humanitarian operations

Many support tools and reference documents on how to address environmental concerns in humanitarian operations are already available. A compendium of support tools with advice on how to use them will be published by the beginning of 2021. Further, more focused training (webinars) based on this compendium will be explored.



The NEAT+ – The Nexus Environmental Assessment Tool² helps humanitarian actors to, first, quickly identify issues of environmental concern in the project location, and then identify environmental risks linked to the project itself (WASH, livelihoods and shelter) and suggests mitigation measures. It can be used on Kobo or Excel. This tool is starting to be increasingly used by UN agencies and INGOs, and it can be used by non-environmental experts, as it is user-friendly and does not require additional financial resources. Online trainings are available. A version adapted to urban contexts is currently under development.



Environment Marker – this was developed by UNEP and adapted by OCHA in 2014 in an attempt to integrate key environmental considerations into the project design for consolidated humanitarian appeals. Through simple codes, the Environment Marker tracks a project's expected impact on the environment, and whether recommended actions have been undertaken. It can be regarded as an additional tool in ensuring that any negative impact, by a humanitarian project, on the local environment is reduced as much as possible. However, it is a tool that has been used mainly to provide guidance for donors and implementing partners. It has not been used across the board, but acts more as a reference to which people can refer to.



UNHCR has also produced a range of technical guidelines on different environmental issues related to camp management³.



Foreign, Commonwealth
& Development Office

Environmental Guidelines – developed by DFID in 2003, and principally aimed at development actions the Environmental Guidelines demonstrate a positive move by a donor to take into account the environment in the screening of the projects it funds. The guidelines provide all DFID staff, particularly project officers, with sufficient advice and guidance to enable them to undertake environmental screening.



Environment and Humanitarian Action (EHA) Connect⁴ – an online library of tools, guidelines, research papers, articles etc. linking the environment and the humanitarian sectors.

² <https://www.eecentre.org/resources/neat/>

³ <https://emergency.unhcr.org/entry/40032/energy-and-environment-camps>
<https://www.unhcr.org/sustainable-environmental-management.html>

⁴ <https://ehaconnect.org>