

**Ex**plain

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# ESSENTIAL BRIEFINGS FOR HUMANITARIAN DECISION-MAKERS

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THE CLIMATE CRISIS AND HUMANITARIAN  
ACTION: CURRENT APPROACHES AND  
DISCOURSE

Climate change is a threat multiplier, exacerbating and compounding needs in places where vulnerabilities are highest and where humanitarians are already stretched. Of the 15 most climate exposed of vulnerable countries in 2022, [12 already](#) had humanitarian country plans and Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) allocations.

From drought-affected Afghanistan, famine-like parts of Somalia and the Horn of Africa, to historic [flooding in Pakistan](#) and global heatwaves, the humanitarian system is unaccustomed to such a widespread and rapid succession of crises. And it will only get worse – the impacts of climate change are anticipated to lead to skyrocketing humanitarian costs exceeding [US\\$ 20bn per year](#).

Despite the increasing prevalence of disasters, there is uneven awareness across the sector about the nature, scale and type of crises that climate change will bring and confusion about the different response options. A [recent mapping](#) by Groupe URD found many humanitarian actors are simply unaware of the need to take climate into account in their programming with increasingly evident gaps in adapting technical areas such as WASH (water, sanitation and hygiene), shelter, food security and a sector-wide lag in understanding the skills and guidance needed to adjust.

What is clear is that the climate crisis will greatly increase the scale of need, due to an increased quantity and intensity of disasters, even further stretching a system struggling to keep up with the current pace of disasters and rising needs. It is also expected to change the nature of crises, as less common natural hazards, such as heatwaves, become more common, while others, such as typhoons, begin acting in new and less predictable ways.

But what makes the climate crisis a real game-changer are the ways it will directly confront the overall business model of international humanitarian action, which at its core functions on the basis of voluntary financial contributions to Global North-based organisations to respond post hoc to the impacts of crises. Aid's model will be challenged practically and normatively:

- As the Global North is more impacted by climate crises, the tendency to address needs at home as opposed to abroad may increase, as was seen with COVID-19, reducing humanitarian spend.
- Normatively, the framing of assistance to disaster-affected countries will increasingly be framed as one of justice and reparations by developed countries, with funds directed to national governments for managing and responding to disasters.
- The need for integrated approaches to risk and disaster and emphasis on resilience will necessitate greater emphasis on the capacity, leadership and governance of local actors.
- The rising case for addressing the potential impacts of disasters before they occur challenges a response-oriented model.

It is unlikely the global political community will consider a Global North-led humanitarian response mechanism to be the primary way in which it addresses the impacts of cascading perma-crises arising from the climate emergency – in the face of increased scale of need and the changing nature of crises, humanitarian actors will need to find different ways to

support people affected by crisis.

What is emerging in terms of humanitarian engagement and preparation largely sits in two categories: trialling new tools and approaches within the current configuration of aid and more fundamental strategic shifts to the model itself.

At the moment, many organisations are well placed to try various tools and approaches and are doing so in experimental pockets. But the scale of change required to deal with the climate emergency is likely to be much bigger than this and will rely on more underlying shifts to the system.

**A number of new tools and approaches are being considered and rolled out. These amount to smaller shifts within the current aid model and include:**

- **Reskilling and reprogramming:** These shifts include adapting relief items for new kinds of emergencies such as heatwaves, for example by changing the type of roofing on temporary shelters to be more adaptable to high temperatures or developing new protocols for cascading or simultaneous crises such as climate-induced conflict. It may also include training staff who have worked in protracted crisis settings to the new realities of compounding crises and responding to sudden-onset disasters.

**'Organisations are reducing their own environmental footprint and mitigating the humanitarian impacts on climate change.'**

- **Greening humanitarian assistance:** Many organisations are in the process of reducing their own environmental footprint and mitigating the humanitarian impacts on climate change. This includes things like providing cleaner cooking fuels, which not only reduces emissions but has knock on effects for health and gender-based violence as fuelwood no longer needs to be collected. Other approaches such as tracking and regularly offsetting carbon emissions, reducing packaging or paper waste, switching to renewable energy and flying less. The [Climate and Environment Charter for Humanitarian Organisations](#), adopted by 355 humanitarian organisations to date, outlines commitments to reduce the impact of their actions on the environment. The commitments are specific and encompassing but are non-binding, and only a few organisations have publicly stated their targets so far.

Measuring the impact of environmental impacts of projects and programmes [needs to be improved](#) and more assistance is needed for organisations to make changes. Given the cost involved in going green, the Climate Action Accelerator (CAA) – a Geneva-based initiative committed to helping organisations halve greenhouse gas emissions by 50% by 2030 – recommends further dialogue between donors and humanitarians to help fund these initiatives and remove financial barriers to partners' footprint reduction efforts.

- **Trialling new models for humanitarian programming:** These are ways humanitarians are reimagining their approaches: by shifting the timing of humanitarian action to before a crisis or adaptive management, which shifts away from standardisation at scale to customisation based on contextual changes.
  - o Anticipatory or early action: activities ahead of a predicted event, to prevent or

reduce acute humanitarian impacts before they unfold, is a widely embraced approach for humanitarians. This can mean releasing funding to communities to help them evacuate or move their cattle once a monsoon warning has been issued or delivering food aid before supply chains are disrupted and made unusable due to an impending crisis. The approach is filtering into many humanitarian organisations: the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) has committed to embedding anticipatory approaches as part of its 2023-2026 Strategic Plan; the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) has pledged to dedicate at least 20% of its emergency funding to anticipatory action by 2025; Save the Children has pledged to use 15% of its internal flexible funding towards this approach by 2024.

- o That said, much of the approach remains ad hoc and falls to small scale, uncoordinated pilots. It also takes place primarily in response to natural hazards and has not adapted to some of the toughest emergencies, including famine or harder to predict hazards. The approach is also often considered as a stand-alone set of actions prior to a crisis and rarely integrated into longer term actions or considerations – including disaster risk reduction, recovery or resilience.
- o Anticipatory action challenges humanitarians as it requires them to coordinate with actors far beyond its own system, with whom they may not even be familiar. It [relies on](#) institutional responsibilities and capacity for communicating forecasting information; legislation to authorise pre-determined action once agreed triggers are met; distribution criteria and other decision making arrangements; pre-positioned financing; and functioning, efficient delivery channels for aid. It also relies on functioning early warning systems which can predict disasters with sufficient time to prevent or mitigate their impacts. Anticipatory action is not a given and much pre-thought and work needs to happen for it to be executed successfully.
- o Anticipatory action is still only a sliver of humanitarian financing and an even smaller part of development or climate financing. According to research commissioned by the [Start Network](#), less than 1% of humanitarian funding is pre-arranged. The literature points to donor hesitancy to put money aside for a crisis that may never happen while funding for ongoing crises is already stretched. Some argue this is something development actors should be paying for. Risk-pooling approaches have been trialled, so the same pot of money can be used for many different hazards, reducing the likelihood it would ever go unused. 'No regrets' concepts with governments and donors are also strongly advocated for. It is important to also keep in mind that while an ex- ante approach is often touted as being cheaper, more effective and more ethical, the small number of activities in this space means [the evidence](#) in support of these claims is limited.

**'As the climate crisis presents potential scenarios for humanitarians, linear approaches will need to shift to ones that can better manage under uncertainty.'**

- o The climate crisis is also driving the need for more adaptive management, an approach that goes beyond the usual adaptation involved in good management – modifying plans in response to changes in circumstances or understanding and using information to inform these decisions. As the climate crisis presents

a range of potential scenarios for humanitarians, linear approaches to planning, implementation and evaluation will need to shift to ones that can better manage under uncertainty. [Adaptive management](#) is an approach appropriate in circumstances of uncertainty and ongoing unpredictable change, as was seen during the COVID-19 pandemic. After a period of learning and greater certainty about the situation and impacts – repeated seasonal flooding, predictable storm surges – more traditional approaches to planning may be used. Alternatively, the climate crisis may present a perpetual state of uncertainty requiring ongoing adaptive management.

- o The literature points to a number of factors necessary for adaptive management to work. These [include](#) flexible budgeting, planning, procurement and reporting processes that allow for changes and adaptations to be made quickly; strong collaboration and trust among stakeholders; time and bandwidth to try new approaches. These are all elements which the humanitarian system has struggled with, increasingly so in a resource- tight environment where there is pressure to spend and low risk tolerance.

Yet these shifts only take the system so far. The climate crisis poses a wholesale challenge to how humanitarians approach what they do. This requires a certain set of strategic shifts. These may move humanitarians out of their comfort zone and raises more familiar sticking points for the sector.

- Applying a risk reduction approach as opposed to, or at the same time as, responding to needs. This requires not only a shift in mindset, but also adopting new planning approaches that take into consideration hazards, exposure and vulnerability. Since 2020, the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR) has worked with humanitarian actors to better integrate risk into planning and programming. They developed a checklist with recommendations for humanitarians to scale up disaster risk reduction at country and local levels and make it more integrated in all parts of the humanitarian programme cycle.

And while Humanitarian Programme Cycle (HPC) guidance now requires Humanitarian Country Teams to include projections and forecasts in annual strategic planning exercises, only few apply a multi-hazard approach and consider interconnected and cascading risks in their response objectives. These hazard-to- hazard risk assessments have yet to consider the more systematic and interconnected approaches. As such, UNDRR has developed a Risk Analysis Guidance for humanitarian practitioners and has rolled it out in a number of country contexts.

There are a number of obstacles when it comes to a risk-oriented approach. First, there are limited funds dedicated to pursuing disaster risk reduction (DRR) outcomes in crisis and conflict contexts. Understanding risk and its impacts requires accurate and reliable data and humanitarians are often operating in contexts where this is scarce. And when there is data, often it is not being used to inform planning. Data analysts are typically delinked from the humanitarian planning cycle, which means risk information does not translate into planning or contingency efforts.

Finally, humanitarians working in crisis affected countries are already struggling with what are considered 'heavy' and 'burdensome' planning and coordination processes. Adding additional exercises to systematically include risk takes time and bandwidth and there

is pushback from humanitarians who say they do not even have time to respond to the emergencies at hand, and that analysing and planning for crises in the future is unfeasible. This sentiment is especially true in places where conflict is the predominant driver of needs.

Nexus approaches: Addressing multi-faceted risk requires engaging in innovative and meaningful partnerships that go beyond the humanitarian system. But the current landscape across the spectrum from prevention to preparedness and emergency response is fragmented with a multiplicity of disconnected stakeholders from the climate, development, humanitarian, disaster risk management, social protection and environment sectors. Each is tackling a part of the issue, but using different terminology, working in parallel, duplicating efforts, or leaving gaps between them. The disjointed nature hampers effectiveness and limits the overall impact of these efforts.

The long-standing division between humanitarian and development organisations has become increasingly apparent. While response after a disaster falls squarely in the humanitarian realm, it is still debated what role humanitarians have when it comes to mitigating the impacts of climate-related disasters or working on the longer term approaches that would help communities better cope the next time.

There are a number of actors with whom humanitarians must connect. Linking with the private sector – both globally and locally – is considered one way to scale up and sustain social protection schemes, which are seen to be an effective way to increase anticipatory cash transfers without creating parallel structures and systems. Government-led disaster risk management systems and plans are also critical – with appropriate legislation, policy frameworks and budgets – but this public foundation is not present in all countries. Most vulnerable countries however face political disincentives, governance barriers and distrust of forecasts, limiting the extent to which they embrace a more anticipatory approach.

But more broadly, addressing risk means moving outside of narrow approaches and budgets like anticipatory action, and integrating into what is referred to as a 'resilience continuum', linked with climate change adaptation, resilience initiatives and development programming. For people affected by crisis, humanitarian offerings are misaligned with their longer-term adaptation needs and priorities, such as finding permanent solutions to persistent riverbank erosion.

UNDRR, as part of its integrating risk into humanitarian action work mentioned above, has launched a number of in-country workshops bringing together typically siloed stakeholders from climate change experts to conflict monitoring specialists, to members of the private sector, government and civil society, to identify drivers of risk, potential impacts based on past impacts and develop a most likely scenario outlining responsibilities and next steps.

**'The current landscape across the spectrum from prevention to preparedness and emergency response is fragmented.'**

Localisation and community level engagement: It is widely recognised that at community level, a localised approach will be the most effective for addressing risk and resilience. Skills, knowledge and expertise exist within national, local and community based



organisations, or local private sector stakeholders who have been on the front lines of response. Some have begun to share their experiences and knowledge in global debates, especially around resilience and adaptation, but on the whole, locally-led approaches and knowledge are not being profiled or fed into the development of tools and guidance.

Acknowledging this gap, eight Principles for Locally- Led Adaptation have been endorsed by 80 governments, leading global institutions and local and international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) who commit to changing their current practices towards enabling more sustainable and effective adaptation at the local level and giving vulnerable and excluded communities greater agency over prioritising and designing adaptation solutions.

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Start Ready, a new financing facility from the Start Network, enables locally-led anticipatory action, where local organisations prioritise risks and provide input on the advance help they most want and need. The mechanism ensures local actors have the funding to respond quickly and appropriately. The approach has been used in a number of contexts, for a range of crises – the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) for river flooding, Madagascar for cyclones and Somalia for drought.

**'Eight Principles for Locally-Led Adaptation have been endorsed by 80 governments, leading global institutions and local and international NGOs.'**

*This briefing offers insight into the emergent efforts and ways the system will have to reorient itself in light of the climate challenge. None – including other approaches such as resilience building, preparedness – is considered a 'magic bullet' and therefore the literature recommends using a combination of approaches. Ultimately, more evidence is needed on which approaches work best under which circumstances.*

## ABOUT EXplain

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Operational decision makers – at all levels – are often the people with the least time to engage with vital new learning and evidence.

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