

Climate change, environment and humanitarian action in Southeast Asia

By Alistair D. B. Cook

Abstract: The climate and environmental crises are humanitarian crises and are threatening the future of mankind. These crises are now affecting the lives and livelihoods of people around the world, and their impacts are growing. To promote the Climate and Environment Charter for Humanitarian Organizations in Southeast Asia, the International Red Cross, Red Crescent Movement and the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University in Singapore, facilitated an online workshop in January 2023 that focused on indigenous experiences in Southeast Asia, the need to realize the interconnections among climate change, the environment and humanitarian work, and ways to make progress in addressing these core concerns. This article summarizes reflections on three discussions. Firstly, humanitarian organizations must not only cooperate with each other, but also with environmental organizations and development agencies to expand and complement their actions. Secondly, the Charter makes it clear that humanitarian agencies also need to play a role in mitigating climate change, but humanitarian agencies have limited experience in this area. As a result, there is an urgent need to build capacity and exchange successful experiences. Thirdly, humanitarian organizations are facing challenges when obtaining climate action funding.

Key words: Climate change, environment, humanitarian action

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Worldwide, millions of people are already facing the harsh reality of climate and environmental crises, which act as a risk magnifier and compound the impacts of other global economic, health and food crises. Launched by the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement in 2021, the Climate and Environment Charter for Humanitarian Organizations guides the sectoral approach to the increasing risks of climate change and how to address its own carbon and environmental footprint.



In this article, the author, Coordinator of Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief for the Centre for Non-Traditional Security Studies, draws from discussions during a recent workshop co-hosted by the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies in Singapore and the Movement on the state of play in climate action for humanitarian actors operating in Southeast Asia and the role the Charter has played so far in addressing current and future crises.

Climate and environment crises are humanitarian crises, and they are threatening the future of humanity. They already affect people's lives and livelihoods around the world, and their impact is growing all the time. While these crises affect all of us, their consequences are even more devastating for the poorest and most marginalized communities, whose capacity to adapt is already often strained, owing to armed conflict, disasters, displacement, weak governance, unplanned urbanization, or poverty. All of these situations are exacerbated by structural inequities and by people's individual characteristics, such as age, gender, disability or livelihood.

The International Committee of the Red Cross and International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies led the development of the Climate and Environment Charter for Humanitarian Organizations together with the global humanitarian community. Since its launch in 2021, the number of signatories has only increased, and work is underway to help humanitarian organizations focus and accelerate their efforts to limit their environmental footprint and address climate and environment impacts through their humanitarian work. Outside the sector, several other actors, including States, government agencies and private foundations have since taken notice and expressed interest to support the endeavor. This was critical progress for the Red Cross Red Crescent Movement; the success of the Charter hinges on how much support, technical and/or financial, the humanitarian sector receives from all its stakeholders.

To promote the Charter in Southeast Asia, the Red Cross Red Crescent Movement and the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University in Singapore facilitated an online workshop in January, bringing together local and international humanitarian organizations, as well as climate science and policy researchers, from across the region to share their experiences, identify



challenges in the Southeast Asian context, and learn from one another on how to integrate climate and environmental concerns into humanitarian work.

The discussions focused on the local experience in Southeast Asia, the need to realize the interconnections between climate change, environment and humanitarian work, and ways to capture progress on addressing these core concerns.

Climate adaptation and resilience in disaster, conflict and fragile settings

Southeast Asia is no stranger to climate-related hazards, from floods, storms and tropical cyclones to droughts and extreme temperatures. Recent studies show that over 152 million people (24 percent of the population) live within the region's flood-prone areas, while over 389 million (62 per cent of the population) live in areas where droughts are common. These numbers are set to rise with the intensification of climate-related disaster risks in the coming months and years, and an added concern is how complexities in the different processes and interrelationships between each environmental event render climate change a non-linear, and rather chaotic phenomenon.

The workshop kicked off with this reality check for humanitarian organizations, who were urged to prepare for and consider the regional impact and scale of future climate events. Acknowledging the multi-layered and multidimensional impacts of climate change and the knock-on effects of its unpredictability on already fragile communities, the organizations worried over their ability to mobilize an adequate response with only 'traditional tools' at their disposal. Preparedness today, they said, 'has taken on a whole new dimension'.

Participants highlighted that even for countries with comprehensive national response plans, recovery from a climate-related disaster would be a slow and painful process, especially for those in the lower-income categories. They also underlined that climate and natural hazard-induced disasters are compounding existing vulnerabilities and adding new dimensions to their work due to the cross-sectoral impacts of climate change in the population. They expressed their need for capacity building initiatives and peer-to-peer exchange of knowledge to improve risk assessment capacities.



A key point raised during discussions was on exploring ways the Movement could enhance community resilience by increasing the capacities of its volunteers through peer-to-peer learning across the region. A regional platform for such exchanges remains sorely lacking, one participant said, as much of the work continues in siloes even within the humanitarian community.

The ICRC also expressed concern over how climate change exacerbates existing risks to people's lives and livelihoods, i.e. as a direct threat affecting critical infrastructure, and an indirect threat creating a strain on critical resources, thus compounding stresses on livelihoods and leading to increasing humanitarian needs, displacement, and tensions. The organization has seen these dynamics in settings where it works in many regions of the world, including in Asia, the Horn of Africa, and the Middle East.

Even with developing climate intelligence and cutting-edge tools with predictive capabilities on the scale and severity of future weather events on cities in the region, participants agreed there was a need to bring these 'closer to affected communities' through education, youth mobilization through leadership on climate change, media engagements, and platforms to share and exchange data and solutions. It became clear that stronger commitments and collective action was needed among all relevant stakeholders at the regional level. Humanitarian organizations should more purposefully connect with one another, and with other communities working in the field, from science experts to governments, government agencies and the private sector. The Charter can, and should, be more proactively harnessed as a tool for this purpose.

Bridging climate change, environment and humanitarian action

Overall, there was consensus among participants that the expected and future impacts of climate change and environmental crises are beyond the capacity of a single agency. This is not only due to the magnitude of the challenges, but also because of its cross-sectoral implications, i.e. health, migration, livelihoods, and because the impacts of environmental crises affect the provision of key ecosystem services that support lives and livelihoods.



Therefore, a first reflection of the discussion was that humanitarian organizations must work in partnerships not only among themselves, but scale up and complement their operations, working in collaboration with environmental organizations and development agencies. This underlines the importance of widely adopting Commitment Five of the Charter on enhancing cooperation across the humanitarian system.

A second reflection underscored that the Charter makes explicit that mitigation is also the role of humanitarian agencies, but that they have limited experience in that matter; capacity building and exchange of successful experience is extremely needed. There was acknowledgement that Commitment 2 of the Charter (on reducing the environmental footprint of humanitarian activities) ‘legitimizes’ the work in mitigation, but there is a need to change the mindset of the practitioners and of government and community partners to work in this thematic area.

A third reflection of the discussion was focused on the challenge faced by humanitarian organizations to access funding for climate action. There was consensus among the participants that humanitarian agencies must mobilize urgent and more ambitious climate action that embrace the leadership of local actors and communities, in alignment with the Commitments 6 and 3 of the Charter. However, many highly vulnerable countries and communities are not receiving the climate adaptation support they need and are being left behind. For example, only an estimated ten per cent of funding is granted at the local level, as donors instead favor large-scale national infrastructure projects that risk missing the mark for local communities.

There was a general agreement on the need for increasing the capacity of humanitarian organizations to access climate finance in a predictable way, following a programmatic approach taking into consideration not only the need of the countries and communities but also the absorptive capacity of humanitarian agencies. In this regard, there are some examples of humanitarian agencies mobilizing funds from multiple sources for scaling up locally-led adaptation work, including the IFRC’s Global Climate Resilience Platform, expected to mobilize one billion CHF over five years to support 500 million people in 100 countries.



Standards and target setting in new climate reality

The Climate Charter has taken on two mutually reinforcing roles in the humanitarian sector. For some organizations, the Charter is a public commitment to the integration of climate and environment impacts that have already taken place in the work they do. Médecins Sans Frontières have committed to sustainability across their projects in 70 countries and pledged to reduce their emissions by at least 50 per cent compared to 2019 levels by 2030. For other organizations, the Climate Charter demonstrates recognition of climate and environmental impacts on their work and a public commitment to prioritize the implementation of climate sensitive operations and reduce their carbon footprint.

What became clear through the discussions is that humanitarian organizations need to work better together to achieve sector-wide change and broaden partnerships outside the sector for greater systemic impact. Some humanitarian organizations have contributed to formulating national goals and ambitions. The ICRC has developed a roadmap that includes targets for different missions that specify the roles and responsibilities of different departments. This effort has integrated the commitment to tackle climate change and environmental crises across the organization so that it is a concern for all its component parts.

The rise of anticipatory action has initiated flexible funding models that moves the dial from reactive and costly measures towards more proactive and preparatory action. Funding allocation remains inadequate and reliant on old ways of working, but investments in anticipatory action has signaled a sectoral mindset shift that needs to be further nurtured and integrated. Anticipatory action is one component of a wider commitment to ramp up action to prevent the worst consequences of the climate crisis. IFRC is working with UN partners leading the Preparedness and Response pillar of the Early Warnings for All initiative to build national and community response capabilities worldwide.

Climate and environmental education for humanitarian organizations and affected communities is essential. There remains a significant need to support the development of young leaders of climate action. The humanitarian sector remains at the early stages of integrating climate change and environmental crises into its work. This is



most notable in the establishment of pilot projects to prepare teams for providing medical services in extreme climate scenarios. While these pilot projects offer experience about how the humanitarian sector can change, wider implementation remains an unrealized goal. The Climate Charter website hosts a digital library of tools and targets to document the progress and experience of different humanitarian organizations as a resource for others to draw upon.

While there is recognition that there is no one-size-fits-all approach for a diverse sector, the planetary health approach offers a unifying and trans-sectoral approach to integrating climate change, pollution reduction and biodiversity protection into humanitarian work. Although there are several innovative initiatives to combat the climate and environmental crisis with varying degrees of implementation, the Climate Charter has drawn particular attention to the work that is needed across the sector and in building alliances with others to turn the Charter commitments into action.

Dr Alistair D. B. Cook is Coordinator of the Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief Programme and Senior Fellow at the Centre for Non-Traditional Security Studies, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.

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