



Policy brief

# Humanitarian action on climate and conflict

Narratives, challenges and opportunities

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## Abstract

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The worsening impacts of climate change on the world's most vulnerable people place the management of climate and conflict risk squarely within the humanitarian domain. The ways in which humanitarian actors approach these challenges matter, both for the effectiveness of emergency response and for broader climate action in fragile and conflict-affected situations. This policy brief looks at how humanitarian actors are setting out their roles, examining their emerging approaches to addressing and reducing needs triggered by climate hazards in fragile and conflict-affected settings, and linking with the work of other actors. It identifies consistent themes, emerging tensions and implications on how to optimise the contribution of humanitarian actors to the whole-of-system efforts needed to build climate resilience.

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A full list of acknowledgements can be found in the full version of this report: Tholstrup and Vazquez (2024).

## About this publication

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# Key messages

- The worsening impacts of climate variability and change on the world's most vulnerable people put managing climate and conflict risks squarely within the humanitarian domain.
- Humanitarian actors are clear that there is no humanitarian solution to worsening climate impacts, and that significant increases in adaptation and resilience efforts in fragile and conflict-affected situations (FCS) are essential to prevent humanitarian crises from spiralling. But, in the absence of these investments, the humanitarian system is increasingly required to address climate impacts in these contexts; something it has neither the resources nor the skills to take on.
- Humanitarian actors have recently increased their focus on how to address the impacts of climate change on vulnerable communities in FCS. There is a clear consensus on how humanitarian action should adapt: it needs to be more anticipatory, more balanced (between building resilience to and addressing impacts of crises), more collaborative and more local. But policy has moved faster than practice and most actors are still operating with a limited toolbox based on patchy evidence.
- Better collaboration with climate and development actors to build systemic, durable climate resilience is a clear goal but is impeded by several factors. These include the absence of climate and development actors from the most fragile settings, differing understanding of and priorities for climate action, and inconsistent donor positions.
- Greater efforts are needed to improve collaboration with other actors to maximise collective impact, translate policy priorities into effective programming, ensure coherence around funding, and identify and scale up approaches that work in FCS.

## Context: climate change and humanitarian action

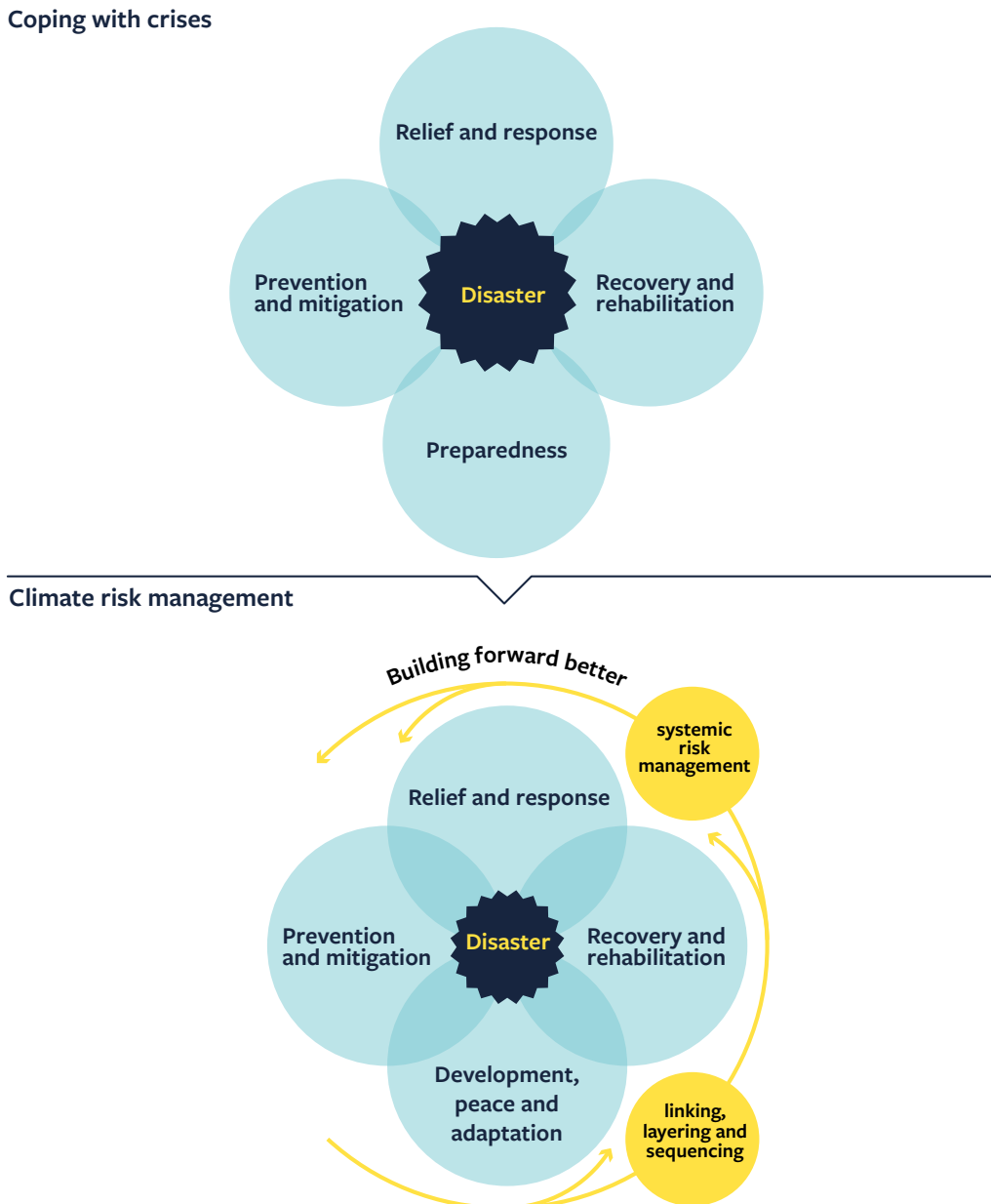
Vulnerable communities in fragile and conflict-affected situations (FCS) are suffering some of the worst impacts of climate extremes, some of which are influenced by climate change. FCS have the lowest coping and adaptive capacity to manage climate hazards or adapt to climate change; they also receive the least climate finance support.

The need to accelerate climate action and the availability of climate finance in FCS is increasingly being recognised, notably in the *COP28 Declaration on climate, relief, recovery and peace* (UNFCCC, 2023). Increased funding and profound changes to ways of working across the international system are needed to realise this commitment. Central to this change is the recognition that no single intervention can build climate resilience by itself. Building durable climate resilience in FCS requires that multiple interventions by all actors are linked, layered and

sequenced in ways that mutually reinforce each other at a variety of spatial scales. They should also be informed by an understanding of the drivers of conflict and climate risk, and how the risks may change over time (Opitz-Stapleton et al., 2023; see Figure 1.) There are several significant barriers to working in this way, which reduce the collective effectiveness of interventions for building systemic, durable climate resilience.

Humanitarian actors are clear that there is no humanitarian solution to climate change risks, but in the absence of increased adaptation investments and with a limited presence of climate and

**Figure 1** Better support for systemic, durable climate resilience requires stronger links and sequencing of a variety of risk-informed interventions



development actors in fragile contexts the humanitarian sector is increasingly left to pick up the pieces. This is putting additional pressure on a system already under serious strain and which is under-resourced, under-prepared and ill-equipped to take on this role. While humanitarian actors are adept at short-term crisis response, moving beyond their core mandates to contribute to community resilience, strengthen preparedness and address protracted crises is challenging humanitarian funding, skillsets and ways of working (Obrecht et al., 2022).

In recent years, many humanitarian organisations have recognised that managing the worsening impacts triggered by climate change requires significant shifts in the way emergency relief is planned, funded and implemented. In particular, this refers to the need to anticipate and respond earlier to climate-triggered disasters, strengthen preparedness and prevention, and support building the resilience of crisis-affected communities. Policy focus has so far moved faster than operations, which often fail to adapt to rapidly changing needs and contexts. There is a lack of clarity on what building climate resilience means, what is effective in building resilience, and what is the optimum contribution of humanitarian action to broader climate-resilient development.

The worsening impacts of climate change on the world's most vulnerable people place the management of climate and conflict risk squarely within the humanitarian domain. The ways in which humanitarian actors are approaching these challenges matter, both for the effectiveness of emergency response and for broader climate action in FCS. This policy brief looks at how humanitarian actors are setting out their roles, examining their emerging approaches to addressing and reducing needs triggered by climate hazards in FCS, and linking with the work of other actors. It identifies consistent themes, emerging tensions and implications for optimising the contribution of humanitarian actors to the whole-of-system efforts needed to build climate resilience.

There are several challenges to identifying a consistent humanitarian approach to climate and conflict, and to siting humanitarian action within the broader spectrum of climate action in FCS (see box).

#### **'Humanitarian' is not a clear category**

On the contrary, it encompasses organisations with a strict lifesaving mandate along with broader and multi-mandate agencies and non-governmental organisations. The options and funding modalities available to humanitarian actors for contributing to building durable climate resilience differ significantly. Local actors are more adept than international actors at working across the humanitarian–peace–development–climate nexus because the communities in which they are embedded face such multidimensional obstacles. It is challenging to talk about a single humanitarian narrative or strategy on climate and conflict, although recent progress on shared and system-wide policy statements and commitments (IASC, 2023; ICRC and IFRC, 2021; REAP, 2023) have set out several shared beliefs and approaches.

More limitations of this work can be read in the full report (Tholstrup and Vazquez, 2024).

# Humanitarian approaches to addressing climate-driven needs in FCS

Several consistent messages and approaches emerge from humanitarian policy and strategy on addressing climate-driven needs in FCS. These can be identified as key shared principles, key programmatic responses and shared ways of working.

## Key shared principles

Humanitarian actors are clear that ‘there is no humanitarian solution to the climate crisis’ (IASC, 2023) and that a greater focus on adaptation and resilience is needed, particularly in FCS, to prevent humanitarian crises from spiralling. They recognise that they are not well placed to build systemic, durable climate resilience in fragile contexts through their own activities, and that other actors need to engage to drive this. But inaction from others means there is growing pressure on humanitarian actors to respond to current climate impacts. In addressing this challenge, humanitarian actors can be described as lying along a spectrum. At one end are actors focused more on core lifesaving activities while advocating for others to step up, bringing more climate action and resources to the most vulnerable communities, and making the case for legal frameworks to adapt to reflect changing needs.<sup>1</sup> At the other end, actors are focused more on how their own work can help build climate resilience in FCS, and how this work can be financed.

To keep the humanitarian impacts of climate change in check, humanitarian actors are clear that a radical increase in climate finance in FCS is required, but they differ over where and how such resources should flow. They also disagree over their own roles in accessing and delivering climate finance. There is broad agreement that humanitarian actors have a role to play in programming limited climate finance in the most fragile settings. However, some recent developments, such as establishment of the Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) Climate Action Account,<sup>2</sup> have divided opinions. Some see the incentive to access climate finance as distorting humanitarian actors’ programming decisions, with interviewees expressing concerns that humanitarian actors see climate as a new funding opportunity but not a new operational reality, and that climate finance will be used to finance existing activities in a cash-strapped humanitarian system (Tholstrup and Vazquez, 2024).<sup>3</sup> There is also a risk that if donors start to channel part of their climate finance commitments through the humanitarian system, the overall pot available to

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1 Reflecting climate-related displacement or migration, for example.

2 This financing window of CERF, which is managed by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), was established in November 2023 to channel climate finance rapidly to and for anticipatory action and humanitarian assistance in response to climate-related disasters (CERF, 2023).

3 The ODI report draws on an extensive literature review, a review of climate strategy, policy documents from more than 15 humanitarian organisations and interviews with 20 expert informants.

both humanitarian and climate actors may shrink, with funding available for core, non-climate-related humanitarian activities squeezed, and resources available for adaptation and sustainable development reduced.

Humanitarian actors also recognise that additional finance alone will not solve the problem of how humanitarians can best contribute to climate action. ‘We shouldn’t be focused on accessing new money but on using existing money better,’ one interviewee argued. These tensions have been particularly evident in negotiations around the Loss and Damage Fund established at COP27.

## Key programmatic responses

Overall, policy commitments to increasing the contributions of humanitarian actors to reducing and responding to current climate impacts have moved faster than operational responses. Most humanitarian actors are operating with a limited toolbox, largely repurposing approaches from programmes operating in more stable contexts to address the impacts of climate hazards in FCS. This includes resilience programming, which has not been shown to contribute to durable resilience in any context.

Most humanitarian organisations emphasise the importance of anticipating weather- and climate-related hazards and responding to them earlier through anticipatory action. There are widespread calls – in the context of a dramatic rise in foreseeable weather-related shocks – to make this the default approach to disaster response, rewiring the ways the humanitarian system plans and is funded: ‘The humanitarian system should be as anticipatory as possible and only as reactive as necessary’ (OCHA, 2021). While the concept of earlier response to potential disasters<sup>4</sup> is unequivocally positive, there are several concerns regarding how this is being implemented. These include the fact that implementation has become overly technical and algorithm driven; humanitarian actors may focus too tightly on anticipatory action as the part of the disaster management spectrum they can ‘own’, limiting its application as part of a wider spectrum of disaster risk management efforts; the long-term and resilience benefits of anticipatory action have been significantly overstated; and anticipatory action may have limited application in FCS.

The importance of supporting the resilience of communities vulnerable to climate risk is emphasised strongly by all humanitarian organisations, but there is no consistent definition of what resilience means, whose role it is, how external actors can support and work with communities’ own efforts to build resilience, what activities can contribute and over what timescale, and even whether it is a useful concept at all (Levine, 2022). Organisations differ significantly in defining the humanitarian role in building resilience in different contexts and how resilience should be measured. Evidence on the contribution of humanitarian activities to community resilience is extremely limited (mainly because this data is not systematically collected) and the little evidence that does exist is not shared across agencies or reflected in

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4 Such as the potential for widespread crop loss and rising food and nutrition insecurity when a multi-month drought triggered by an El Niño event is forecasted.

programme design. Despite resilience being highly context specific, similar projects are regularly replicated across contexts, even when there is no rigorous evidence for their effectiveness in building community resilience in any context. While action to increase the climate resilience of vulnerable communities is needed urgently, and should not be delayed until the perfect evidence base or constellation of actors is present, there is a need for immediate action that is innovative, engages with and supports longer-term efforts wherever possible, and lowers the barriers to entry for long-term actors where they are not present.

Funding for humanitarian resilience activities is becoming increasingly squeezed, with growing pressure from donors for humanitarian actors to focus more narrowly on their lifesaving mandate. Multi-mandate actors have more freedom to innovate but tend to conduct resilience programming through their own structures rather than in partnership with other actors. For some multi-mandate agencies, resilience programming is carried out by and funded through their development arms. Local actors are generally less challenged than international actors to work across silos as these are rarely differentiated at the community level. Some organisations and their donors have inconsistent policy positions across humanitarian and development departments, which can present further challenges to effective working on resilience in fragile contexts.

The need for better integration of climate and conflict risk into humanitarian planning and programming is emphasised across the board, with some organisations setting ambitious targets to mainstream climate risk across all programmes.<sup>5</sup> While some progress has been made on integrating short-term<sup>6</sup> climate risk into humanitarian planning, medium- and longer-term considerations are still absent and conflict risks and ‘do no harm’ principles (which may not be considered at all) are largely treated separately from climate risks. This increases the risk that humanitarian interventions can undermine longer-term adaptation efforts and contribute to maladaptation, especially if they are not linked with longer-term planning activities or informed by climate change risks.

## Shared ways of working

Joint policy commitments place a strong emphasis on the need to work more closely with climate adaptation and development actors to deliver more impact in climate-vulnerable settings. Yet despite many emerging good practice examples of working together, several barriers hinder consistent collaboration. Donors’ funding and policy silos – where policy coherence across

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5 For example, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies has committed to factor climate and environmental risks into all its programmes and humanitarian responses by 2025, making it ‘climate-smart’ (IFRC, 2023).

6 There are no consistent definitions of short, medium or long term, which also hampers the management of different risks. ‘Short term’ might be considered as spanning the next few months to a couple of years, ‘medium term’ as two to five years, and ‘long term’ as five or more years. Taking the long view (five years to multiple decades) becomes most important when building infrastructure like schools, health centres or borewells, as failure to account for climate change in such interventions can lock in maladaptation.



departments is lacking – hamper the joined-up working for which they advocate. Differing priorities, spatial and temporal focuses, and the approaches of different actor groups to climate resilience can make practical collaboration challenging, while an increasingly constrained funding environment incentivises competitive behaviour over collaboration within and between actor groups. Longstanding efforts within the United Nations system to strengthen the humanitarian–peace–development nexus have proven relatively ineffective, with 75% of those surveyed for the 2022 *State of the humanitarian system* report rating progress in strengthening the humanitarian–peace–development nexus as ‘fair’ or ‘poor’ (Obrecht et al., 2022). These efforts also exclude key groups of actors, including local civil society, government (in some contexts) and the private sector. Finally, different levels of access and appetite for risk mean that some actors are better able to work in volatile contexts than others, which can be a challenge for effective joint working.

Humanitarian organisations have a strong focus on local action in climate-vulnerable fragile settings. This includes the importance of getting finance to the local level, the need to identify and support local resilience strategies, and the need to centre vulnerable communities in adaptation planning and programming. This focus does not consistently translate into action, and progress on the humanitarian localisation agenda has been slow and patchy. In fact, the funding provided directly to national or local organisations has decreased from 2.8% of total humanitarian assistance in 2017 to 1.2% in 2021 (Development Initiatives, 2022). A gap remains between the intention to identify and build on locally led approaches and how humanitarian programming functions in practice, which continues to be predominantly top down. Humanitarians’ local focus – if not well integrated – can present challenges for joint working. Some argue that ‘individuals themselves cannot meaningfully be expected to adapt to climate change’ (Opitz-Stapleton et al., 2023) and therefore that small-scale livelihoods or asset transfers should not be presented as making an individual or a community more climate resilient. While individual- and community-level support is a critical piece of the puzzle to help cope with climate shocks, systems-level change – creating opportunities and protections for people based on their long-term needs and aspirations (including economic opportunities, access to basic services and markets, and legal protections) rather than just on their immediate vulnerabilities – is needed to build durable climate resilience. Both must happen in parallel, in ways that support and engage with each other.

Most organisations are clear that an urgent focus on learning is needed to identify and understand what interventions are effective in climate-vulnerable contexts in FCS, and to increase their scale. However, robust evidence on programme effectiveness is still kept largely within organisations and used as a resource mobilisation tool, with many organisations ‘collecting success stories rather than evidence,’ according to an interviewee (Tholstrup and Vazquez, 2024). Local perspectives on effectiveness are rarely considered. A rapid shift is needed to increase innovation and to collect, make sense of and share robust evidence, which is treated as a public good to accelerate system-wide learning.

# Key tensions in how humanitarians think about and address climate-driven needs in FCS

**Figure 2** Key tensions in humanitarian narratives around climate action in FCS



Source: Tholstrup and Vazquez (2024)

# Policy recommendations

## **Improve collaboration with other actors to maximise collective impact**

Commitment to improve collaboration with other key actor groups exists, but several impediments occur in practice. Humanitarian organisations should step up their roles as advocates for increased climate action in FCS and their efforts to partner with development and climate actors and bring them into the areas of highest need, as well as to ensure that legal frameworks reflect changing needs and realities (including climate mobility). Country-level aid coordination structures should adapt to support this, and opportunities to bring different actor groups together around concrete risks and programmes should be pursued actively. Clarity is needed on where humanitarian actors are best placed to contribute to climate risk management in different contexts (what elements of vulnerability and climate risk, for whom and at what scales) and how this differs from and intersects with the roles of other actors.

## **Translate policy priorities into effective programming**

Humanitarian organisations are clear that new approaches are needed, and efforts are under way to adapt programming to support vulnerable communities through climate shocks and longer-term impacts. Emerging humanitarian–climate policy is relatively clear on the unique role of humanitarians in addressing needs in the context of climate change; more evidence and innovation are now required to translate these broad policy positions into operational-level action. Renewed focus is needed on how the critical short-term interventions required to help vulnerable communities cope with and reduce the impacts of imminent climate hazards can support efforts to build systemic resilience over the short, medium and long terms. The humanitarian system should seek to draw clearer lines around defining the optimal humanitarian contribution to building climate resilience, recognising that this will differ by context, sector and the climate risks particular to that context/sector.

## **Ensure coherence around funding**

Humanitarian actors have advocated that more climate finance needs to be channelled to FCS and they should maintain pressure to see resources committed and funding processes adapted in line with policy commitments. More clarity is needed among humanitarian actors on how these resources could be channelled most effectively, considering the need to maximise available finance for adaptation and development as well as for humanitarian response. Where climate finance flows through the humanitarian system, this should be additional to, and not displace, core humanitarian funding. Donors should make every effort to ensure policy coherence across relevant departments and that their funding approaches support rather than hinder joined-up and mutually reinforcing efforts across actor groups in FCS, being careful not to incentivise poor programmatic choices.

## **Identify and scale up approaches that work in FCS**

Humanitarian organisations are invested in understanding what works in reducing and addressing the impacts of climate variability and change on the world's most vulnerable people. But more support for and rigour around evidence and learning is required, particularly regarding whether and how preparedness, anticipatory action and resilience programming can be effective in FCS. A new approach to evidence-gathering is needed to accelerate system-wide learning on the methods that are most effective in addressing the climate challenge in FCS.

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