

The Climate and Environment Charter for Humanitarian Organizations: Strengthening the humanitarian response to the climate and environment crises

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Abstract

Since its launch in 2021, the *Climate and Environment Charter for Humanitarian Organizations* (the Charter) has been signed by hundreds of humanitarian actors across the world, including local and national organizations, United Nations agencies, National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, and large international NGOs. The Charter's development grew out of a sector-wide recognition that humanitarians have a role to play in addressing the crises of climate change and environmental degradation, and that fulfilling this role would entail changing how they work. Two years into its existence, the Charter has helped build momentum towards this change and has provided a useful measurement tool for how much remains to be done.

This paper traces the origins, inspiration and process of the Charter from the perspective of the present authors, who co-led the Charter's development. The article highlights some of the challenges that we faced and how these were addressed. In taking stock of progress towards the Charter's goals, the article flags areas where further effort is needed to adequately strengthen the humanitarian response to the climate and environmental crises.

Keywords: climate change, Climate Charter, climate risk, environmental degradation, humanitarian action, climate adaptation.

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Climate change and environmental degradation have severe humanitarian consequences. They threaten lives and livelihoods and water and food security, worsen public health, increase displacement, and perpetuate vulnerabilities and inequalities.¹ Yet, until relatively recently, climate change and environmental degradation have remained peripheral to the humanitarian agenda, were seen largely as development issues and were most often considered through attempts to reduce the environmental impact of humanitarian action.² The International Red Cross Red Crescent Movement (the Movement) was an exception to this, notably steered by the Red Cross and Red Crescent Climate Centre, established in 2002 to help the Movement and its partners reduce the impacts of climate change and extreme weather events on vulnerable people.³

Things have shifted in the last five years beyond the Movement as well. In 2019, the United Nations (UN) High Commissioner for Refugees appointed a special adviser on climate action. Other organizations and networks have developed institutional commitments on this issue: in 2020, InterAction and more than

1 Hans-Otto Pörtner *et al.* (eds), "Summary for Policy Makers", in Hans-Otto Pörtner *et al.* (eds), *Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability: Contribution of Working Group II to the Sixth Assessment Report – Journal of Social History and the History of Social Movements*, Vol. 54, 2015. See also: Cambridge and New York, 2022.

2 Paul Knox Clarke, *Climate Change and Humanitarian Action*, ADAPT Initiative, Oxford, 2021.

3 Kirsten Rosenow-Williams, "Climate Change and the International Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement", *Moving the Social – Journal of Social History and the History of Social Movements*, Vol. 54, 2015. See also: Red Cross and Red Crescent Climate Centre, "Where We Work", available at: www.climatecentre.org/where-we-work/ (all internet references were accessed in August 2023).

eighty of its members adopted a Climate Compact, ten members of the French Réseau Environnement Humanitaire co-signed a Statement of Commitment on Climate by Humanitarian Organizations, and Médecins Sans Frontières signed its Environmental Pact.⁴ During the same period, several organizations emphasized the importance of addressing the impacts of climate change on humanitarian action in their strategies.⁵ Sound technical guidance on greening operations and on integrating climate risk management into humanitarian programmes was produced.⁶ This shift was reflective of the progressive recognition that the climate and environment crises are humanitarian crises and that humanitarian organizations have to adapt their responses and ways of working.

Despite this progress, an overarching, high-level and collective commitment from the humanitarian community to improve its practices and to do more to tackle the climate crisis, and that could more comprehensively capture and reflect progress from across the sector, was still missing. This recognition triggered the development of the Climate and Environment Charter for Humanitarian Organizations (the Charter).⁷

This article outlines the Charter's contents, its inspiration and the process that led to its creation, from the perspective of the present authors, who co-led its development. It highlights some of the challenges we faced and reports on progress achieved since the Charter was opened for adoption by the humanitarian sector in May 2021.

The Charter, in brief

The Charter is a short and aspirational text that promotes a transformational change across the humanitarian sector. Its seven commitments are intended to guide humanitarian organizations in stepping up and improving their humanitarian action to address the climate and environmental crises and reduce humanitarian needs. Each commitment is accompanied by a short explanatory text. Further explanation and guidance, as well as recommendations on tools and considerations on targets, are provided on the Charter website.

The first two commitments, organized hierarchically, represent the backbone of the Charter. The first commitment is to step up the response to

4 InterAction, *The NGO Climate Compact; Commitments towards Environmental Action and Sustainability 2020–2022*, Washington, DC, 2020; Réseau Environnement Humanitaire, *Statement of Commitment on Climate by Humanitarian Organisations*, 2020; Médecins Sans Frontières, *The Environmental Pact*, Geneva, 2020.

5 See, for instance, International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA), *ICVA 2030 Strategy: A Collaborative Future for Effective Humanitarian Action*, Geneva, 2022; International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), *Strategy 2030: Platform for Change: Global Reach, Local Action*, Geneva, 2018; International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), *ICRC Strategy 2019–2024*, Geneva, 2019.

6 For examples of existing guidance, see Climate and Environment Charter for Humanitarian Organizations, "Guidance", 2021, available at: www.climate-charter.org/guidance/.

7 Climate and Environment Charter for Humanitarian Organizations, 2021, available at: www.climate-charter.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/ClimateEnvironmentCharter-EN.pdf.

growing humanitarian needs and to help people adapt to the impacts of the climate and environmental crises. This entails focusing on the reduction of risks and vulnerabilities to shocks, stresses and longer-term changes through an increased focus on climate change adaptation, disaster risk reduction and anticipatory action, with particular emphasis on those most at risk because of individual characteristics – such as gender, disability or legal status – or because of the situation in which they live – such as poverty, migration or armed conflict. Signatories commit to ensuring that their programmes are based on sound risk analyses and are informed by the best available science and data, and local and indigenous knowledge.

In line with the principle of “do no harm”, the second commitment is to maximize the environmental sustainability of humanitarian work while maintaining the ability to provide timely and principled humanitarian assistance. Organizations commit to implementing sound environmental policies and to assessing the immediate and longer-term environmental impact of all their work. They also commit to measuring and significantly reducing their greenhouse gas emissions, in line with global goals, and to using natural resources and managing waste responsibly.

The next four commitments focus on *how* to achieve these ambitions, from embracing local leadership and building knowledge to nurturing collective action and leveraging the influence of the humanitarian sector. Signatories pledge that their action will be guided by the leadership, experience and knowledge of local actors and communities, that they will ensure meaningful and inclusive participation of communities and local actors at all stages of the response, and that they will invest in locally led, durable responses. They also commit to enhancing their understanding of climate and environmental risks and improving their use of science, evidence, technology and communication. Organizations promise to enhance cooperation and share data and analysis across the humanitarian system, in particular between local, national and international actors, and to work far beyond the sector to ensure a continuum of efforts to manage risks and develop sustainable interventions. They commit to informing and influencing decision-making with evidence of people’s experience and the current and future humanitarian consequences of the climate and environmental crises, and to promoting the implementation of relevant international and national laws, standards, policies and plans for stronger climate action and environmental protection.

The last commitment is to develop targets and measure progress in the implementation of the Charter. This means that within a year of adoption, each signatory of the Charter must develop its own specific time-bound targets that reflect its scale, capacities and mandate. Organizations commit to reporting transparently on the impact of their work on the climate and environment and to seeking feedback from the people they serve. This commitment is intended to rally collective action across the sector, and builds accountability into the signing process. In recognition of the resources and effort necessary to realizing the Charter’s ambitions, the text of this last commitment highlights that the support

of donors is essential to shifting ways of working as this entails changes in mindset and approaches, as well transition costs.

The genesis and the process

The development of the Charter was co-led by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC). The idea was born in early 2019, as the ICRC started paying closer attention to the impacts of climate change and environmental degradation on conflict-affected communities, perhaps because unlike at the IFRC, the topic had not been at the top of the ICRC's agenda before, and teams who were witnessing dire humanitarian impacts were calling for guidance on their role in addressing the climate and environment crisis. The 1994 *Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and Non-Governmental Organisations in Disaster Relief* (Code of Conduct) provided inspiration for what a sector-wide document might look like; over the last three decades, its clear and simple principles, endorsed by nearly 1,000 organizations, have come to define the way humanitarian organizations work.⁸ There was a clear sense that something similar would help steer the humanitarian response to the climate and environment crises. This feeling was apparent across the sector, surfacing in publications, events, and discussions between humanitarian actors in the lead-up to the Charter's launch.

The IFRC was an obvious partner for this project, bringing a wealth of knowledge and experience through many years of work with National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (National Societies). It had long followed climate policy discussions and had tried to ensure that the humanitarian perspective was reflected in these exchanges, and it felt that this call for a clearer vision and framework strongly resonated with questions that were regularly asked in climate policy circles, and notably at the Conference of Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. There, the IFRC often had to explain the role of National Societies and the humanitarian sector in responding to the climate crisis.

As co-drafters, the present authors took inspiration from the development of the Code of Conduct – a short, sector-wide set of principles and commitments – and so turned to the statutory meetings of the Movement to formally launch the process to develop a Charter. At the 33rd International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent in December 2019, the ICRC and IFRC, joined by ten National Societies, took a pledge to urgently adapt their own humanitarian work and scale up activities that contribute to strengthening the resilience of communities to climate risk and environmental degradation.⁹ In the

8 IFRC and ICRC, *The Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) in Disaster Relief*, 1994. List of signatories available at: www.ifrc.org/code-conduct-signatories?webform_submission_value=&webform_submission_value_1=&page=0.

9 33rd International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent, "Strengthening the Resilience of Communities to Climate Change and Environmental Degradation through Climate-Smart Humanitarian Action", Pledge Number OP330098, 11 December 2019.

same pledge, the ICRC and IFRC committed to leveraging the leadership of the Movement in order to nurture a consensus on the humanitarian response to the climate and environment crises and develop a climate and environment charter that would be made available to the wider humanitarian sector for adoption in the spirit of the Code of Conduct.

To guide the process, we decided to create an Advisory Committee that would both provide expertise and ensure sectoral representation. We invited representatives of local, national and international NGOs, UN agencies and National Societies, as well as academics, researchers and experts in the humanitarian, development, climate and environmental fields, to join. The Committee represented a number of humanitarian networks, including the International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA), the Alliance for Empowering Partnership, InterAction, the Environment and Humanitarian Action Network, the Steering Committee for Humanitarian Response and the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) sub-working group on climate change.

The Advisory Committee proved immensely helpful, remaining engaged throughout the process and making available its expertise and that of its networks. With its guidance, a zero draft that captured core commitments on climate and the environment was developed by the IFRC and ICRC in 2020. It was used as the basis for consultations with the humanitarian sector.

The consultation process

Given the ambition to develop a charter for and with the humanitarian sector – in all of that sector’s diversity in terms of scale, mandates and capacities – it was essential to listen to and reflect with humanitarian workers from all over the world. This is also why the finalized Charter includes no specific reference to the Movement and bears no emblem. The goal was to aim for a sector-wide document from the beginning, through the Charter’s development and in crafting its independent identity.

Over the course of four months, from December 2020 to March 2021, the drafting team held nineteen live virtual regional and national consultations, and two open consultations for the whole humanitarian sector. Several consultations were organized in collaboration with humanitarian networks, including regional consultations in four languages organized with ICVA for its members, NGO partners and NGO networks, and with the Movement. Consultations were also organized with InterAction, the IASC sub-working group on climate change, the Réseau Environnement Humanitaire, UN agencies, and local NGOs in India and South Sudan, in collaboration with the All India Disaster Mitigation Institute and the South Sudan NGO Forum.

Live consultations were complemented by bilateral discussions and an online questionnaire that was made available in English, French, Arabic and Spanish. The draft was also shared widely through the networks of various organizations and the Advisory Committee. In total, over 200 people participated in the consultations and more than 150 organizations provided feedback on the



Figure 1. The process to develop the Charter.

first draft. This led to a revised version of the Charter, which was redistributed across the humanitarian sector for final comments. A small number of organizations provided further feedback, which led to minor revisions. The feedback received throughout the process was presented in a public report.¹⁰

Listening to the humanitarian sector

Humanitarian workers who joined the consultations welcomed the project with enthusiasm and provided feedback that led to a stronger text. There were several remarks on the overall tone and substance, with a call to emphasize the existential nature of the crises and the need for radical transformation. Important discussions also centred on whether the Charter should take a more explicit position on climate justice and the responsibility of rich countries to address the consequences of the climate crisis. Many flagged that the Charter would be a useful tool for internal advocacy for stronger environmental policies within organizations, but that implementation would require tools, guidance and support.

The first commitment attracted the most specific feedback – this was expected, given its focus on the core work and mandate of humanitarian organizations. Comments focused on elements that needed to be further emphasized, such as the importance of taking preventive measures and reducing risk, and on clarifying the role of humanitarian actors in meeting rising humanitarian needs and helping people adapt to a changing climate, acknowledging that humanitarian action alone could not support holistic climate adaptation.

Significant feedback was also provided on the second commitment, on the reduction of the climate and environmental impact of humanitarian action. It was deemed important to clarify that these steps could not be to the detriment of timely humanitarian responses. The initial draft included a commitment to achieve net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050, which was thoroughly discussed, with diverging perspectives. Many were worried that this target was not ambitious enough, given the risks attached to unmitigated climate change and the determination to lead by example. Others, mostly smaller-scale organizations

10 ICRC and IFRC, *Consultations on the Climate and Environment Charter for Humanitarian Organizations: Summary of Feedback and Revisions: Consolidated Feedback on the Climate and Environment Charter for Humanitarian Organizations Gathered during Consultations Conducted between December 2020 and March 2021*, Geneva, 2021.

with limited resources, were concerned that the inclusion of any specific targets would make adoption more difficult, given their limited capacity to invest in reducing their emissions. In addition, several contributors flagged that a commitment to net zero would be difficult to meet in isolation even for larger organizations, as it would be highly dependent on support from and cooperation with other sectors – such as the manufacturing, shipping and packaging industries, to reduce the environmental footprint of the goods that humanitarian organizations buy. There were several questions about the ethics of using carbon offsets and other tools to achieve this objective, and a call for explicitly referring to the centrality of reducing greenhouse gas emissions in the commitment itself.

The third (on working with local communities and leadership) and seventh (on targets to measure implementation) commitments were the two others that attracted the most feedback. There were considerations on how to go beyond slogans with regard to working with communities and local leadership, as well as heated discussions on whether the Charter should include numerical targets.

The feedback received from the humanitarian sector led to several changes and to a stronger Charter. The introduction was changed to further emphasize the scale and extreme urgency of the crisis, and the need for a drastic reduction in greenhouse gas emissions and strengthening of environmental protections. The revised text also recognizes that those who have contributed least to the problem are hit hardest by its impacts, and includes a call to address loss and damage associated with the effects of the climate and environmental crises.

The reference to the 2050 target of net zero emissions was removed to address concerns both that it is not ambitious enough, and that its inclusion would complicate adoption. On carbon offsets, the text specifies that high-quality reduction projects to offset unavoidable emissions might complement, but not replace, reduction efforts. The commitment to working closely with local communities was reinforced to highlight their lead role.

When it came to targets, it was decided that the text would not include numerical ones because participants flagged that the capacity and mandate of local, national and international humanitarian organizations would influence the type of targets that they could realistically adopt and live up to. It was strongly felt that predetermined targets would exclude some organizations or result in less ambitious text, as a common denominator would need to be found. At the same time, participants emphasized the importance of ensuring that the Charter would lead to real changes: for this reason, the final text made it clear that organizations were committing to developing their own targets, informed by science, and to reporting publicly on them. It was also agreed that guidance on and examples of suitable targets would be provided on the Charter website.

Rallying the humanitarian sector

On 21 May 2021, the text was opened for adoption by all humanitarian organizations, and was signed by the IFRC and the ICRC. The response was

Table 1. *Breakdown of organizations that provided feedback*

National Societies	33
International NGOs	29
National NGO and INGO local/regional chapters	57
Humanitarian networks	9
UN agencies	13
Think tanks, research organizations, others	15

Table 2. *Diversity among signatories*

Signatory breakdown by type (as of 5 July 2023)	Number	Percentage
Humanitarian networks	13	4
Research organizations, think tanks, consultancies	13	4
National Societies	133	36
National and local NGOs (including INGO local/regional chapters)	113	30
INGOs	92	24
UN agencies, international and intergovernmental organizations	6	2
Total	370	100
Geographic breakdown of local and national organizations and National Societies*	Number	Percentage
Africa	84	34
Asia	41	16
Europe	57	23
North Africa and Middle East	30	12
North and Central America	23	9
South America	10	4
Oceania	7	2
Total:	252	100

* The geographic scope of local and national organizations represents a rough proxy for that of all signatories. Many international NGOs and organizations, while headquartered in major capitals, have global or multinational operations. Including only their headquarter locations would skew the geographic distribution of signatories.

remarkable, with more than 100 organizations and networks joining during the first year. Since then, the number of signatories has been steadily growing, reaching over 350 by the second anniversary of the Charter's launch.

As the number of signatories rose, governments began to take notice and to ask how they could be involved to show their support for its commitments. The Charter was designed for and by humanitarian organizations, but it includes clear references to the role of others in supporting and enabling its transformative potential. The text highlights the importance of mobilizing urgent and more ambitious climate action and environmental protection. For this, it is essential to have governments and other decision-makers on board. Furthermore, implementing the Charter requires financial and technical support, which requires the support of donors.

In light of the willingness and interest of governments to express their support, in autumn 2021 it was decided to open a "supporters" category through which States, local and regional governments, government agencies and departments, and private foundations could indicate their support. Since then, ten States and the European Union have joined as supporters. Other complementary initiatives have also emerged. In March 2022, during the European Humanitarian Forum, humanitarian donors were invited by the European Commission and France to sign up to a new Declaration on Climate and the Environment.¹¹ The Declaration echoes the Charter, as its signatories commit to investing in, preparing for, anticipating and responding to disasters, improving cooperation and partnerships at all levels, and reducing the environmental impact of humanitarian activities.

Supporting signatories

It was always clear that the Charter itself would be a first step towards a better humanitarian response to the climate and environment crises and that meaningful change would hinge on the translation of its commitments into reality. This is why the commitment to set concrete targets and work towards their implementation is so critical. Doing so helps organizations clarify their objectives, orient their efforts and, by sharing those efforts publicly, learn from one another. By March 2023, slightly more than 10% of signatories have shared their targets.¹²

This is a good start, but it is insufficient. On the first anniversary of the Charter, the present authors surveyed humanitarian organizations to better understand why so few had defined their targets and how they could be further supported to implement the Charter. We received nearly 100 responses from

11 *Humanitarian Aid Donors' Declaration on Climate and Environment*, French Presidency, Council of the European Union and European Commission, 2022.

12 For submitted targets, see Climate and Environment Charter for Humanitarian Organizations, "Targets", 2021, available at: www.climate-charter.org/targets/.

people working in over 100 countries and in every region of the world for international, national and local NGOs and National Societies. We heard calls for help with developing concrete targets – reflected in the still-limited number of organizations that have submitted them so far – compiling successful examples and case studies, and developing tools and technical standards for specific sectors, such as water or food. We also heard that peer-to-peer exchanges and direct assistance to develop targets and implementation plans were needed.

In other words, humanitarian organizations were asking for hands-on support to live up to their commitment and adapt their programmes and ways of working. We have assessed that such a service could be provided by two complementary components: a small, independent, virtual secretariat acting as a referral service that will guide signatories towards existing resources, assess support needs on an ongoing basis, share information and represent the Charter externally, and a constellation of experts and resources to which the secretariat can refer signatories.

The latter is already in progress, with a mapping of existing resources and experts who can potentially support signatories as they set targets and implement programmes commissioned by the Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations.¹³ At the time of this writing, conversations on support towards a secretariat administered by ICVA and governed by the IFRC, ICRC, ICVA and two rotating members are ongoing.

We hope that by setting up such a structure, we can speed up the implementation of the Charter – an urgent endeavour, given the state of the climate and the environment and the humanitarian consequences that these crises are generating. It will be worth taking stock of progress in a few years by assessing what has changed in the sector and the extent to which organizations have adapted their practice to better meet the needs of communities facing growing climate and environmental risks, to reduce their environmental footprint, and to mobilize those who can strengthen climate action and environmental protection in humanitarian crises.

13 Marion Reinoso and Paul Knox Clarke, *Implementing the Climate Charter: Analysis and Mapping of Expertise Available to Signatories on the Implementation of the Climate and Environment Charter for Humanitarian Organizations*, INSPIRE+ Consortium, 2023.