



Articulating social and environmental policy for post-COVID-19 recovery

Environment in COVID-19 humanitarian response in Latin America and the Caribbean

POLICY BRIEF

While in many high-income countries, COVID-19 has resulted in the mobilisation of a “whole of the state” emergency response, in many countries in Latin America and the Caribbean, the humanitarian response to COVID-19 is effectively a “response inside a response”. 17 countries are covered by the appeal to fund the response to the humanitarian needs of Venezuelan refugees and migrants outside of their country, yet the response to COVID-19 has to run alongside the management of shelters, satisfaction of basic needs and social integration of those people. The response to COVID-19 in Colombia must be adapted to the ongoing response to the needs of people affected by the internal situation in the country. The response to COVID-19 in Venezuela must work alongside the response to the country's current socioeconomic and humanitarian context. The region has a large caseload of refugees, migrants and internally displaced people (“people on

the move”¹) as well as slum-dwellers and the urban poor, who are some of the most vulnerable groups and disproportionately affected by the COVID-19 crisis. They are more vulnerable to the virus due to existing morbidity, greater exposure to air pollution, overcrowded homes, the predominance of informal work and poor environmental health.

These are inauspicious circumstances in which to respond to a pandemic. Before the propagation of COVID-19, resources were stretched, healthcare systems were already overloaded, and the situation did not provide circumstances in which waste could be appropriately managed, nor for environmental dimensions of humanitarian situations to be considered. In addition, many environmental standards are being rolled back top speed up the state response to COVID-19. Environmental solutions must be realistic in the context that we face.

1. “People on the move” is a generic term to refer to people in a state of mobility, without differentiating between refugees or migrants, given the different legal and policy issues associated with these two groups.



Informal recyclers separate waste on the dump every day, now increasingly exposed to the risks of unsterilised healthcare waste. Cateura, Paraguay. Photo: Dan Stothart, UNEP.

Failure to engage with the response phase of the emergency would mean that the environmental damage from a response which does not consider environmental impacts would already have been done. Failure by humanitarian actors to address the environmental dimensions of the situation and the response would be against the principle of Do No Harm.

This paper attempts to contextualise UN Environment Programme's (UNEP) programme and policy options in the shorter-term humanitarian phases of the emergency to the reality of the region. No other UN agency has a mandate to work on the environmental dimensions of emergency response.

Policy and technical support options in emergencies

In Latin America and the Caribbean, UNEP approaches in the emergency phase respond primarily to environmental issues associated with the short-term response. Options presented here aim to address the initial phases of the response to COVID-19 and are specific to Latin America and the Caribbean. Some are regional adaptations of the corporate strategy and some are additions to respond to specific challenges in the region.

1 Healthcare waste management in emergencies

It is important to note that many of the countries affected by emergencies in the region were already unable to use best practice in treating healthcare waste within the public health system and are now additionally coping with infectious domestic waste. Therefore, approaches need to recognise that it would not be feasible to advocate for implementation of best practice systems in the context of the multiple emergencies now affecting those countries. UNEP has already provided some more generic advice through the environmental field advisers supported by UNEP and embedded in United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Colombia and Brazil. However, opening links between these operations and expert sources of advice and guidance on healthcare waste management in emergencies would be beneficial and low cost. How to manage healthcare waste in the context of refugee / migrant shelters, transit centres and in the temporary health posts supplementing government-run clinics set up in informal settlements without incurring significant costs to local governments is of significant concern.

However, other waste streams are likely to be generated by the response phase, from bottled water and alcohol gel, distributions of packaged hygiene items and masks, take-away food (instead



Mattresses being sanitised and cleaned to be reused avoiding the generation of massive volumes of waste. Boa Vista, Brazil. Photo: Fabiano Sartori, UNHCR.

of community / shelter kitchens), construction waste from the construction or expansion of temporary shelters, camps, health centres and isolation areas and similar. While UNEP should not aim to be the environmental police and increase the burden on humanitarian partners aiming to respond to COVID-19, UNEP can provide technical advice on the best forms of fast construction with minimal environmental impact, as well as management of the associated waste streams.

2 Mitigation of environmental impacts of the response (shelters and health centres, cash and voucher assistance)

Beyond waste management, the humanitarian response to COVID-19 is likely to have direct and indirect environmental impacts, most of which will be unexpected and could be mitigated through careful planning. For example, provision of cash or supermarket vouchers to people on the move to substitute community kitchens is likely to result in increased deforestation for (free) fuel, unless a voucher restricted to fuel provision is considered. Disinfection of shelters, transport terminals and areas of humanitarian assistance may result in pollution of rivers and streams and impacts on biodiversity unless advice is provided on appropriate types of disinfectant to use. Food distributions may replace community kitchens over time. This may increase packaging waste, generating an environmental impact as well as increased public health risks associated with vermin and mosquito-breeding in rainwater gathered in packaging waste. UNEP could leverage connections in other programmes, such as the Resource Efficiency programme, and with the private sector to promote the use of ecological packaging (compostable, made from natural materials and similar). Working with actors involved in food distribution may provide an opportunity to promote the distribution of quick-cooking foodstuffs to reduce fuel consumption.

One of the key issues driving the demand for COVID-19-specific response measures in existing humanitarian contexts is the need for space. Humanitarian actors



A pilot project to introduce vegetation (mostly trees) at shelters, testing a cocoon technology, including agricultural training and environmental education sessions. A committee by beneficiaries was formed. Brazil, Tarau Parú indigenous community. Photo: Fabiano Sartori, UNHCR.



Sint Maarten Island. Photo: Dan Stothart, UNEP

often need to build additional shelters or quarantine facilities to increase distance between people. This implies additional construction waste but also greater tension with host communities, themselves under stress due to restrictions and impacts associated with COVID-19. Such tensions are important, since they can result not only in small-scale targeted violence and xenophobia but might also erupt into public protests which could facilitate disease propagation. Environmental approaches can be used to offset some of the impacts of this additional construction and to reduce community tensions, such as rehabilitation of parks and green spaces, reforestation of public spaces and streets, installation of more public waste bins or similar. COVID-19 is also likely to lead to a loss of income for the informal recycling sector, which is made up of the poorest members of society, including people on the move in many LAC countries.² UNEP may be able to advise on how to provide appropriate measures to maintain the recycling sector and limit the risk of recycling being discontinued due to movement restrictions or because of a rush towards alternative humanitarian response approaches (e.g. an expansion of unconditional multipurpose cash assistance to the detriment of supported livelihoods activities with environmental benefits such as recycling). UNEP can also advise on emergency livelihoods and environment during country-level socioeconomic assessments.

3 Integration of opportunities to advance environmental benefits through the response

It is likely that the humanitarian response will gradually evolve from a primary focus on water, hygiene and health to inclusion of other sectors, such as energy, emergency livelihoods, temporary employment and others. Within the framework of these sectors and their objectives, environmental activities can be developed as a win-win approach. This might include promotion of technical advice to support ecological soap-making as a livelihood or identifying members of a population of displaced people with academic or professional experience in environmental health or waste management. UNEP can help agencies to explore options.

4 Integrating the relationship between environment and humanitarian needs in humanitarian response plans

Through the provision of technical advice to agencies leading humanitarian response and humanitarian response planning, UNEP can offer support to the integration of an environmental dimension in the global humanitarian response plan (HRP) to

2. ILO estimates that two billion people globally in the informal sector are at risk of losing work due to COVID-19: https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/@dgreports/@dcomm/documents/briefingnote/wcms_740877.pdf

COVID-19. The global HRP is an aggregate of the COVID-19 modifications in existing country HRPs and is being updated throughout the crisis. This is an opportunity to influence thinking on pandemic response and environment. All of this goes beyond support to member states in their medical reaction, addressing the response of the UN system to the most vulnerable people whose needs are often overlooked or insufficiently covered by the governments in the countries where they find themselves.

Over the medium term, UNEP can support member states developing tools to address the environmental issues associated with pandemic preparedness and response in humanitarian action. However, given the time that these processes take, this would be more useful for future pandemic or response to future "waves" of COVID-19, rather than the current situation, since responses are already designed and ongoing. Furthermore, UNEP will continue to offer remote environmental response support to other environmental emergencies during lockdown and movement restrictions. A remote technical support approach has already been developed for a recent environmental emergency in the region.

Partners


UNEP can partner with ministries of environment, civil protection agencies and ministries of health, UN agencies and other interested humanitarian response partners. UNEP can work with local humanitarian partners and advise them in their interactions with local government and civil protection agencies.

Resources

www.ehaconnect.org
www.eecentre.org

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Tactics and implementation strategies

UN Environment's strength is in technical support. Primary implementation approaches would vary based on the level of complexity and type of engagement required, but could include:

- Remote assessment and analysis leading to the development of "offline" advice for low-cost and low complexity actions to integrate environment in the form of remote technical support and accompaniment;
- Remote training and awareness-raising on environment in humanitarian action in the context of COVID-19;

- Embedded technical staff in field operations, regional offices or advisory teams of lead agencies in their HQs for longer and more intensive support for more complicated cases (requires lifting of travel restrictions);
- Environmental screening of proposals adapted to humanitarian programming;
- Leveraging the Regional Network on Environment and Emergencies, which is currently being organised, as a space for exchange of ideas and capacity building with ministries of environment and any observer organisations.