

Climate change and humanitarian change – challenging norms, mandates and practices

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Climate change is going to change the humanitarian sector.

The situation is alarming. Disasters related to climate change, such as storms, wildfires, drought, flooding, and heatwaves, have almost

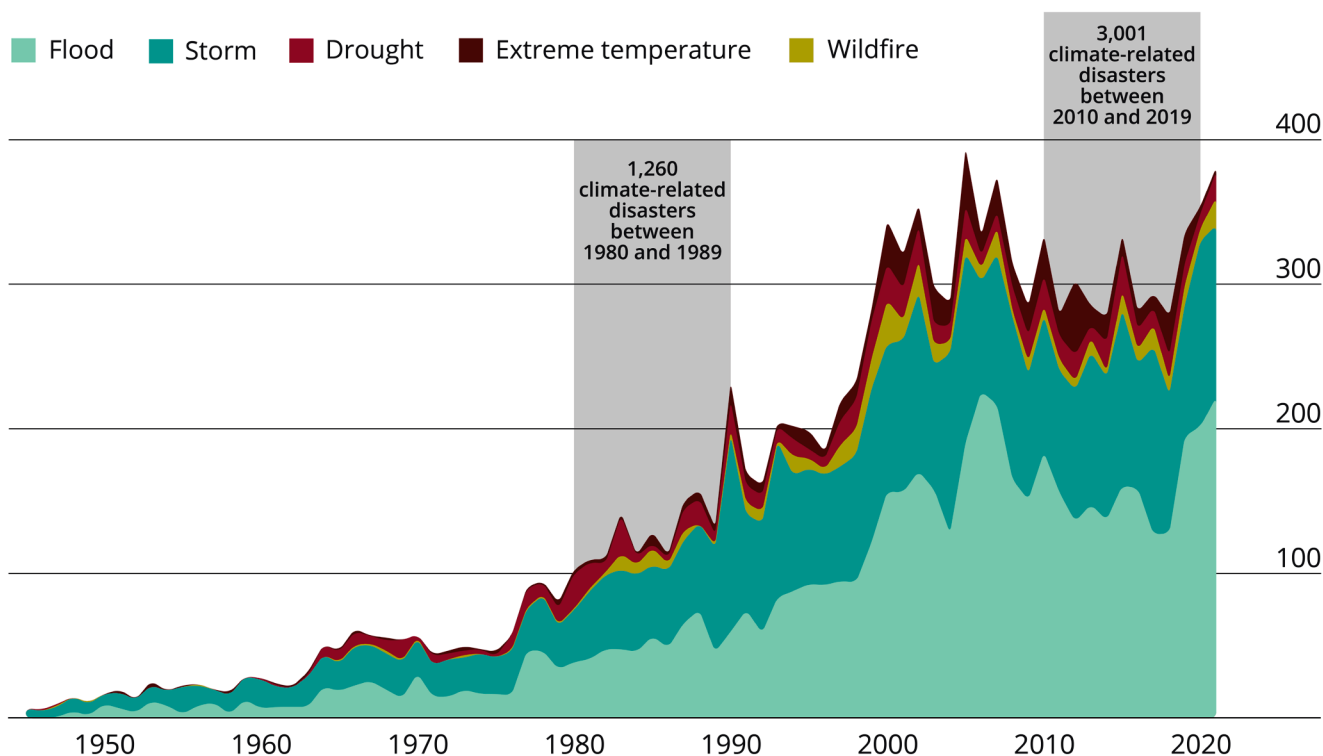
tripled in the past 40 years. Environmental risks are becoming increasingly complex, with weather-related disasters growing in frequency and triggering severe

ripple effects across all sectors of society. As a result, the humanitarian sector will be faced with a growing number of crises and disasters, characterized by greater frequency, larger scale and heightened magnitude.

Climate change is poised to reshape the humanitarian sector, presenting a “sink or swim” situation. While some necessary adjustments and processes have already

Climate-related disasters almost tripled in current decade compared to 1980s

Flood occurrences tripled, while the number of extreme-temperature was six times more during the same period.



Graph: Global Humanitarian Overview 2023
Source: WTO/CRED, adapted by CHA

been initiated, the bulk of the journey still lies ahead. Currently, the entire humanitarian system, along with humanitarian organisations, is ill-prepared and lacking the necessary financial, technical and capacity resources to effectively address the multifaceted impacts of the climate crisis.

The future of humanitarian action revolves around two fundamental paradigms: scaling-up, adapting the scope of humanitarian action to the projected requirements, and skilling-up, adapting the capacities and qualifications necessary to respond adequately. This transformation is essential, even in the face of diminishing resources for individual crises and ongoing reductions in humanitarian budgets. In fact, it is precisely these challenges, exacerbated by global warming, that necessitate a profound shift in the humanitarian sector's approach.

To inform further change-making, the paper will look into three central areas of adaptation: (1) the operational area of implementing humanitarian programmes, (2) the norms and principles that inform the how and why of humanitarian climate action as well as the humanitarian future overall and (3) the examination of the current mandate of humanitarian action.

Methods in brief

This paper is primarily based on a literature review and three subsequent stakeholder consultation workshops. The initial two consultations took place exclusively with representatives from German humanitarian NGOs, primarily from the policy departments. The third workshop discussed the results of the prior research process with members of donor governments and humanitarian experts. Additional insights were derived from external consultation processes and expert roundtables.

Key findings

- 1,5 degrees of global warming is a planetary boundary (Armstrong McKay et al. 2022). Humanitarian aid needs to invest in mitigation measures to help **reduce emissions**, adaptation measures to support regions and communities in adjusting to the consequences of global warming and **take a stand** in Loss and Damage, concerning the responsibilities for those situations that can no longer be mitigated nor adapted to.
- A **re-evaluation of the core humanitarian principles**, their centrality and their adequacy in addressing the climate crisis is necessary to strengthen the basis for future humanitarian decision-making.
- The climate crisis further informs the debate about the **boundaries of the humanitarian mandate** and its connectivity to other aid sectors, including development assistance. This broadens and contextualizes the familiar nexus discussion.
- The **temporality of humanitarian engagement** stands as a central parameter of necessary change-making. First and foremost, temporal aspects are important in terms of the operations undertaken, from being less reactive and more preventive, agile and anticipatory. Given the increasing protractedness of crisis exacerbated by climate change, humanitarian actors are well advised to consider adapting the timelines of their programming cycles. Lastly, the temporal dimension has the capacity to initiate humanitarian conversations about responsibilities concerning both the present and the future, deriving from past and present inequities. This includes, for instance, discussions under the current Loss and Damage debates. Additionally, it offers an opportunity to contemplate a positive humanitarian idea of the future and the role of humanitarian engagement in co-creating this future.

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