



**Intersessional Meeting
of Environment of Latin America and the Caribbean**
Bridgetown Barbados

5-6 November 2019

Distribution:
Limited

UNEP/LAC—IC.2019/6
20 October 2019
Original: English

**Concept note – Strengthening resilience to
environmental impacts of emergencies in Latin America
and the Caribbean through the development of an
Environment and Emergencies Preparedness Network.**

Background:

1. Environmental emergencies caused by natural and/or man-hazards already cause significant environmental damage, harm to human health and livelihoods and massive economic losses every year. Exposure to these hazards is increasing under rising urbanisation, overpopulation and climate change¹. Climate change is acts as a threat multiplier², driving conflict, insecurity, labour migration and associated human mobility³. In the first half of 2019, seven million people were displaced by disasters, almost twice as many as those displaced by conflict⁴.

2. The environmental impacts of disasters and emergencies further undermine affected people’s coping strategies, further increase their humanitarian needs and weaken their resilience. Those environmental impacts may leave behind environmental legacies and set back sustainable development and good environmental management. As the UN system seeks to address the Sustainable Development Goals, addressing the environmental dimensions of emergencies and reducing the risk of future environmental emergencies becomes increasingly important.

3. In Latin America and the Caribbean, hurricanes and earthquakes result in the generation of huge volumes of disaster waste, as was the case in Bahamas (2019), Cuba (tornado, 2019) Dominica (2017) and Ecuador (2016). Volcanic eruptions result in contamination of water sources and agriculture with toxic chemicals, affecting human health and livelihoods, as happened in Argentina in 2011. Industrial / chemical accidents have included pesticide spills (Guatemala 2015), fires at storage sites for decommissioned transformers (Paraguay 2015), oil spills and unstable dams (Colombia 2018). The UN Environment response model relies on the deployment of technical experts to address the environmental impacts of emergencies, while building country capacity to reduce risk and be better prepared.

4. UN Environment continues to address the environmental impacts of human mobility and the environmental impacts of humanitarian response through its partnerships with UNHCR and IOM in Brazil, Colombia and Guatemala, and by working with the R4V regional platform co-chaired by UNHCR and IOM at regional level.

5. It is therefore necessary to support countries to improve their preparedness to manage the environmental dimensions of emergencies and strengthen risk reduction, beginning with placing the issue on the regional political agenda. This responds to significant interest from a number of countries in the region, expressed at the Buenos Aires Forum of Ministers and elsewhere.

Conceptual framework:

6. *“An environmental emergency is defined as a sudden onset disaster or accident resulting from natural, technological or human-induced factors, or a combination of these, that cause or threaten to cause severe environmental damage as well as harm to human health and/or livelihoods.” UNEP/GC.22/INF/5, 13 November 2002*

7. In this paper, the term “environmental emergency” is used rather than disaster, to avoid the possible interpretation that the paper’s remit is limited only to events caused by natural hazards. “Environmental emergency” is the internationally accepted technical

¹ UNISDR (2015). Global Assessment Report on Disaster Risk Reduction 2015. Geneva: UNISDR.

² <https://www.yaleclimateconnections.org/2019/06/why-climate-change-is-a-threat-multiplier/>

³ In the context of humanitarian emergencies, human mobility refers to situations in which people are on the move, whether as migrants, refugees or asylum seekers. The term human mobility is used to avoid entering into the legal specifics of migration or refugees.

⁴ <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/extreme-weather-hurricane-florence-refugees-dorian-world-a9103216.html>

term in the sector (see above). Environmental emergencies may be caused by natural hazard impacts, social events, industrial / chemical accidents or conflicts. Increasingly, UN Environment addresses the “environmental dimensions of emergencies and crises,” since some of the biggest and most challenging environmental impacts arise from disaster situations and protracted crises, not just sudden onset disasters or accidents.

8. “Environment in humanitarian action” refers to identifying the environmental impacts of humanitarian response actions and the potential opportunities that an emergency may pose to address underlying environmental challenges and promote sustainable development⁵. UN Environment is increasingly seeking to deploy technical expertise to facilitate the incorporation of environment in humanitarian action in protracted crises.

Institutional context:

9. The UN Environment / OCHA Joint Unit was created in 1994 to facilitate the response to environmental emergencies. The Joint Unit mobilises technical expertise to deploy to emergencies and also works on readiness for response and risk reduction, primarily through knowledge sharing, trainings and the development of tools and guidance. Since 2015, UN Environment has regionalised its “Disasters and Conflicts” programme, with a regional humanitarian affairs officer based in each regional office. No other staff are dedicated to the programme at regional level.

10. UN Environment’s non-resident model has made it challenging to grow the programme, since most humanitarian donors do not fully understand how emergency situations can be addressed from a regional office in another country. As a result, fundraising has been very restricted, and the programme continues to function in the region with only one staff member.

Current and recent UN Environment work in the region:

11. Response: UN Environment continues to mobilise response to environmental emergencies when requested by affected states or in support of the UN system. Most recently, staff and associated experts were deployed to Bahamas (2019) and Colombia (2018, twice).

12. Environment and human mobility: At the request of UNHCR, UN Environment has mobilised experts who are embedded in UNHCR’s operations in Brazil and Colombia, helping UNHCR and all other response partners to consider the environmental impacts of the mixed flows of refugees and migrants; the impacts caused by common response actions; and possible opportunities whereby humanitarian actors can address underlying environmental challenges through their work.

13. Disaster Waste Management: Following consultations with the Caribbean Disasters and Emergency Management Agency and the Caribbean hurricane season of 2017, UN Environment is developing a Caribbean proposal to strengthen preparedness for the management of disaster waste in small island developing states.

14. Environmental emergency risk reduction: In the recent past, UN Environment implemented a regional training on the “Awareness and Preparedness for Environmental Emergencies at Local Level” (APELL) methodology. APELL is a methodology which takes a disaster risk reduction approach to major industrial accident risks. Subsequently, UN Environment adapted the methodology for application in a town affected by high risk artisanal gold processing in Colombia. The pilot project

⁵ https://www.unocha.org/sites/unocha/files/EHA%20Study%20webfinal_1.pdf

concluded in December 2018. As a part of the UN Country Team, UN Environment has participated in the development of concepts which include strengthening preparedness for environmental emergencies in Belize and a separate proposal aiming to reduce the risk of environmental emergencies in the agriculture sector in Central America, following lessons learned from the Guatemala pesticide spill in 2015. Both concept notes await feedback from donors.

15. Although the portfolio of the Disasters and Conflicts programme is broader than this, given that there is only one permanent staff member assigned to the programme for the entire region, the decision has been made to focus on a few items to generate impact. Elements more closely related to ecosystem management and disaster risk reduction are already addressed at scale through the climate change programme's "ecosystem-based adaptation" approach.

International decisions and mandates:

16. The relationship between environment and emergencies (both response and risk reduction) has been addressed by UN Environment, UNEA, the UNEP Governing Council (UNEA's predecessor) and the UN Environment approved programme of work going back at least 25 years. It is therefore nothing new to UN Environment or the global environmental agenda.

17. The UN Environment Programme (UNEP)/UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) Joint Environment Unit (JEU) was established in 1994 as the United Nations mechanism to mobilise and coordinate emergency assistance to countries affected by environmental emergencies and disasters with significant environmental impact. The unit was established in accordance with the recommendations of a 1993 governmental meeting and formalised in July 1994 by the heads of OCHA and UNEP. For 25 years, it has successfully coupled UN Environment's environmental know-how with OCHA's humanitarian coordination mandate.

18. The UN Environment Governing Council Decision "UNEP/GC.26/15 on Strengthening International Cooperation on the Environmental Aspects of Emergency Response and Preparedness" (February 2011) considers the Joint Unit as the principal multilateral tool for mobilising and coordinating international response to environmental emergencies. Furthermore, it stresses the importance to continue to contribute to strengthening the United Nations response mechanism for the coordination and mobilisation of international assistance to countries facing environmental risks and impacts from disasters caused by natural hazards as well as and man-made events.

19. In more recent time, the 2018 Forum of Ministers of the Environment Decision on Climate Change stated that Ministers of the region were "Noting with concern the increasing impact of climate-related disasters in the region, such as hurricanes, floods and droughts; observing the evidence that their severity is increasing due to changes caused by greenhouse gas emissions; and considering the impact they have on human lives, livelihoods and the environment, and the resulting humanitarian challenges, including the management of waste generated by a disaster." The 2016 forum Decision on ILAC highlighted the need to "implement and strengthen regional risk management cooperation mechanisms to lessen the impact of anthropogenic disasters and those caused by natural phenomena". Paragraph 27 of the Declaration of Buenos Aires (2018) highlights that ministers intend "To recognise the importance to respond quickly to environmental emergencies with the support of United Nations Environment

Programme and other relevant organisations and commit to work on actions to reduce the risk of these events”.

Proposal:

20. Intersessional meetings are normally a technical space to monitor progress on the implementation of decisions taken by the Forum of Ministers of Environment. There was no decision related to environment and emergencies or the UN Environment Disasters and Conflicts programme at the 2018 Forum. However, there was significant interest expressed by several countries in making the issue of environment and emergencies (including risk reduction and preparedness) more visible.

21. UN Environment proposes to hold a discussion session with participants in the intersessional with a view to identifying interest in organising / setting up a regional intergovernmental network on environment and emergencies, made up of focal points. Such a focal point would ideally be located in the environment ministry or other ministry as delegated by ministers. The network would be modelled on the successful experience of the UN Environment Chemicals Network. The environment and emergencies focal points would be expected to liaise closely with counterparts located within state civil protection/disaster management agencies, and specifically those responsible for global emergency response mechanisms. The network would particularly address country capacity and preparedness, as well as facilitating intergovernmental support during response.

22. Membership of the network would be voluntary and require a low time commitment, at least initially. Over time, the network would:

- a) Aim to raise awareness within environment ministries and other arms of government of the relationship between environment and emergencies and UN Environment response and risk reduction services;
- b) Raise the profile of risk reduction and preparedness for the environmental dimensions of emergencies in the regional political and technical agenda;
- c) Contribute to the implementation of the 2020 Agenda and other relevant frameworks⁶;
- d) Facilitate the elaboration of decisions on relevant issues to be put to the Forum of Ministers of Environment;
- e) Link to other relevant intergovernmental spaces, such as the “MIAH” (*Mecanismo Internacional de Asistencia Humanitaria*, or International Humanitarian Assistance Mechanism, an intergovernmental space similar to the Forum of Ministers but for country civil protection / disaster risk management agencies, with OCHA providing secretariat services);
- f) Strengthen exchange of best practice and capacity building, including via South-South Cooperation, in risk reduction and preparedness.

23. No significant internal funding is available for the Disasters and Conflicts programme between the Intersessional and the next Forum of Ministers, with the funding received for 2019 already committed. As a result, the network proposal is intentionally limited in scope until resources can be secured to strengthen its coordination.

⁶ Agenda for Humanity, Sendai Framework and others as relevant.

Methodology:

- a) Presentation on recent emergencies in the region – setting the scene and demonstrating the need;
- b) Facilitated discussion on interests and relevance, possible topics for the network and remit.

Outputs:

- a) Instruction from the intersessional meeting of the Forum of Ministers of Environment to begin the process of conforming the Environment and Emergencies Preparedness Network;
- b) List of interested countries developed;
- c) Initial brainstorm of potential remit and topics of network written up.

Essential stakeholders:

- a) Ministries of Environment;
- b) Intergovernmental organisations (notably CDEMA, CEPREDENAC).
- c) Network members would be expected to liaise with state civil protection agencies, as noted above. OCHA could help to extend the network to civil protection agencies, possibly acting as an observer in the network. While it is not foreseen that UN agencies would join the network, their participation as observers could be explored. UN Environment would fulfil a secretarial and coordination function within the group.

Level and type of engagement:

24. Although this point would need to be discussed during the event, it is expected that the initial engagement following the instruction from the Forum of Ministers would involve developing an initial draft terms of reference and list of topics of interest. This would ideally be facilitated through additional human resources, which might it might be possible to mobilise if there were an official instruction from the Forum of Ministers to set up the network. Two webinars would be organised during the first year of the network. Network members would be expected to hold internal consultations within their ministries to further develop the list of topics of interest, as well as to try to support advocacy to facilitate the incorporation of counterparts from country civil protection / disaster management agencies.

Limitations:

25. While the Chemicals Network has been a success, this network benefits from the fact that environment ministries already had focal points for the respective chemicals conventions. Most environment ministries in the region do not have focal points for environment and emergencies, especially not when considering that the concept is not limited only to chemical or industrial accidents. Some of the larger countries have multiple focal points, which may make coordination a challenge.

26. There has been a tendency to see emergencies as being “too sensitive” to address, even though Latin America and the Caribbean is the region in which the JEU has supported the most environmental emergency response deployments over the past few years. However, governments have often faced a public relations challenge when an environmental emergency happens, and questions are raised about why so little work on preparedness had been done. Rather than seeing environment and

emergencies as too sensitive to address, the group might be able to support governments to start to understand the issue of environment and emergencies as too important to continue to neglect.

⌘⌘⌘⌘⌘