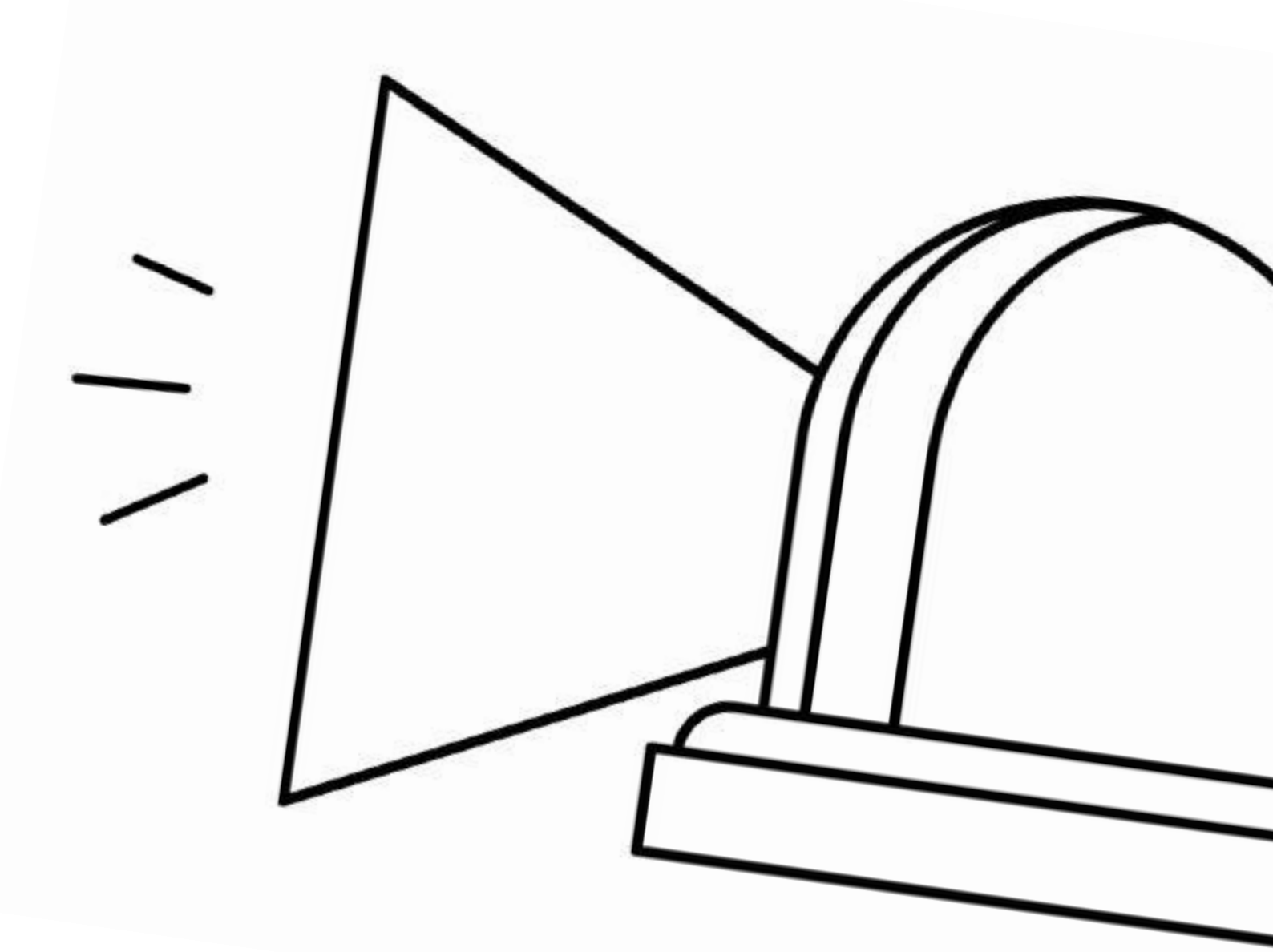

Sounding the Siren

Preparing the aid system for the climate emergency

Scoping study

UK-MED

hcri

Save the Children

DISASTERS EMERGENCY COMMITTEE

Every year, the lives and livelihoods of millions of people are destroyed by disasters – both caused and made worse by the climate emergency. That number is growing. From wildfires to droughts, both rich and poor countries hit are hit. But the world's most vulnerable bear the brunt. As the COVID-19 pandemic highlights, emergencies deepen poverty, widen inequality, and threaten global security.

Aid workers warn we are unprepared for the escalating crisis. The effects of climate change are already being felt at 1.1°C of global heating, and progress towards limiting climate change-causing emissions is slow. Even if warming is limited to 1.5 degrees, as stipulated in the Paris Agreement, emergencies will continue to hit harder, more frequently, and for longer. Increasing numbers of people will be left without healthcare, shelter, and food. The result will be suffering on a scale beyond our experience.

Aid workers adapted quickly to the significant challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic.

- How can this learning, innovation and pace-change address an even larger threat?
- How can the aid system improve?
- What are the barriers to change?

This scoping report pulls together experiences of aid workers and communities and suggest solutions for **governments, aid and development organisations, and concerned global citizens.** The 2021 international climate negotiation, known as COP26, presents a watershed moment to act together to protect peace, prosperity and wellbeing now and in future. But global challenges require global solutions. The global community must act now to face down this existential threat.

All humanity depends on it.

The crisis in numbers:

In 2019, there were more than 300 disasters: **77% were climate and weather related (IFRC).** This number is six times greater than the 1970s (IASC).

In 2020, a record **244 million people** were in need of humanitarian assistance. That's 1 in 33 people.

2020 was one of the top 3 warmest years on record (WMO).

Cylone Idai: A Turning Point

"In the last 20 years, disasters are more intense and more widespread in areas where they didn't happen before. Mozambique cyclones being one such example of extreme and unpredicted events .... Although we still have a cyclone and hurricane season, these events happened out of season. We see an intensification of number and severity of cyclones, also occurring in areas that they didn't happen before, making them more difficult to predict."

Humanitarian environmental specialist, 20 years experience

Key Findings and Recommendations

Seven key findings were drawn from interviews with aid workers from around the world, a survey and a literature review. They are highlighted below, along with recommendations for governments and aid organisations to address these challenges. The full report will be launched in October 2021, accompanied by a communications campaign and digital story.

1. Closing the Information Gap

Finding: Climate change poses a vast and daunting information challenge for aid workers. Many respondents reported that they do not know where to find relevant information and are not confident using it. Data is dispersed and not in digestible formats for field operations.

Recommendation: Aid organisations require support to "translate" climate information into usable formats for field staff.

What is needed?

- **Data confidence:** A one-stop-shop for credible and reliable information is required. In an era of uncertainty and incomplete information, those planning and developing humanitarian strategy need to be able to rely on analysis of trends and projected impacts.
- **Data translation:** Information on climate change needs to be centralised and presented in a useable form for aid workers at local and international levels. Good quality research and data analysis will help identify likely humanitarian needs and resource gaps.
- **Data literacy:** Aid workers need training and support interpreting and using risk information and maps for more complex situations (e.g. early warning systems) and in less familiar geographies.

2. Planning for Scale

Finding: Aid workers observed that climate change is driving increasingly dramatic peaks in need, which are growing cumulatively over time. However, the aid system is built to respond to interspaced finite problems, not continual, overlapping, and compounded emergencies.

Recommendation: Increased needs driven by more frequent, deadlier, and overlapping crises need to be built into operational planning.

What is needed?

- **Planning over longer timescales:** Due to how aid is financed, annual planning windows are most often used by aid organisations. Donors can support preparation by shifting funding windows to the medium (e.g. four years) and longer term (e.g. ten years) where possible.
- **Planning for multiplier effects of climate change:** Business as usual is not an option; aid organisations must ensure they are not simply planning for a repeat of past emergencies. Climate change is a game changer that exacerbates and accelerates current suffering and inequities.
- **Planning for extremes not yet experienced:** Whether working in health, food security, protection, shelter, organisations must plan for a steep trajectory of need.

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3. Acting Early

Finding: Pre-emptive action saves lives, time and money. Pilot projects in diverse situations demonstrate the benefits of acting early. However, the aid system is geared to respond when emergencies become acute.

Recommendation: Policy makers, local partners and aid organisations must support early intervention by committing to upfront investments.

What is needed?

- **Clear thresholds for action:** Decision-making between relevant government agencies, UN agencies and NGOs globally should be guided by data. Monitoring systems will track agreed-upon triggers to prioritise action that averts deepening crises.
- **Planning before action:** Planning and costing requirements need to be determined ahead of time, with expertise and funds pre-allocated and stock pre-positioned.
- **Putting a price tag on inaction:** Inaction is costly and catastrophic. Donors and policy makers must support early interventions.

4. Resourcing Fit for Purpose

Finding: Increasing numbers of people in need of assistance means increased demand for funding, supplies and people. Emergency appeals consistently fall short of targets and aid organisations carry significant staff vacancies. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted precarious supply chains for equipment from PPE to ventilators. Supplies for emergency responses often take weeks or months to arrive. Just-in-time is just-too-late.

Recommendation: Aid organisations, particularly those operating at local levels, urgently need greater access to predictable, sufficient and sustained resourcing. This will enable communities to fully prepare, respond and recover from crises exacerbated by climate change.

What is needed?

- **Things:** Ready-to-go stocks of life-saving materials like medicines, shelter kits, food, and Non-Food Items (NFIs) must be scaled up and made accessible to local and international organisations. Organisations need to work together to take inventory of current materials, quantify future needs, and fill requirement gaps. Procurement processes must be accelerated and harmonised, utilising local markets and avoiding international transport where possible.
- **People:** Aid organisations often struggle to find human resources during a crisis and specialist vacancies are the norm. The aid system needs a long-term vision for bringing people into the sector and training staff. International 'surge' staff will always be needed for large crises, but national responders will continue to save the most lives. Training and preparation efforts at a national level should be prioritised.
- **Money:** Donors and policy makers are encouraged to fund flexibly. Funds that can arrive in time to act early for predictable events and adapt to the unpredictable will save the most lives. This will require faster decision making, commitments to longer responses. More funding must reach local organisations.

5. Collaborating Beyond Sectors and Borders

Finding: Vulnerability to climate change is complex – linked to poverty, inequality, insecurity and compounded by lack of investment in disaster risk reduction and environmental protection. Multiple organisations are working, often separately, to address interrelated issues. Funding tends to address symptoms and causes as discrete issues.

Recommendation: Governments, humanitarian and development partners, local NGOs, civil society, philanthropists, and businesses must act together.

What is needed?

- **Local as possible, international as necessary:** The scale of climate change impacts transcends the emergency response capacity of any one nation or region. Timely international response is crucial, but local national responders will always be first on scene and save the most lives.
- **No competition:** Tensions between aid and development organisations for influence and funding compromise efficacy. Adaptation and mitigation of climate change impacts are necessary, and the climate emergency will need the skills and experiences of all organisations.
- **Encouraging new responders:** Prevention and response should include governments, local NGOs, and non-traditional actors like the private sector. Solutions such as disaster? insurance and increased use of cash response need to be scaled up, at the same time as seeking new innovations.
- **Academic and practitioner partnerships:** Linking knowledge producers, innovators, public and private sectors to test new solutions and technical know-how will improve climate change mitigation and adaptation.

6. Getting the Humanitarian House in Order

Finding: Acting fast to save lives often means less attention is paid to limiting the negative effects of humanitarian activities on the environment. Aid organisations have a part to play in contributing to climate action while delivering aid to people who need it.

Recommendation: Aid organisations need to embed environmental and climate change policies, learning from challenges and good practice.

What is needed?

- **Climate positive programming:** From environmental education to fit-for-purpose shelters that address risks such as floods, wildfires and disease outbreaks – all programming needs to prevent further environmental degradation.
- **Embedding climate policy:** Organisations must look at existing environmental standards, and make sure that these are being integrated into response. This includes standards such as the Sphere Humanitarian Charter, Core Humanitarian Competency Framework (CHC), and UN environmental guidelines.
- **Clear targets for action:** Aid organisations need to establish a baseline of current environmental impacts and sett improvement targets in the areas such as energy, waste and supply chains.

7. Speaking Up

Finding: Aid workers see the impact of climate change on vulnerable communities. Yet climate change is not viewed by policy makers, or even some aid organisations, as a humanitarian crisis. Advocacy was seen by many organisations as too political.

Recommendation: Speaking up is essential to the humanitarian mandate to save lives.

What is needed?

- **Joining the dots:** Aid organisations can better advocate for those most impacted by the climate crisis by communicating the climate emergency as a unifying issue with climate events, not standalone disasters or crises.
- **Aid workers as climate advocates:** Action on climate change must be part of the central ethos of humanitarian organisations, championed by staff and leadership across the aid system.
- **Collective voice:** Humanitarian organisations from high- and low-income contexts need elevate the voices of people living in crises and influence global policy making.

A GALVANISING PLATFORM FOR ACTION

Given the seven findings and recommendations discovered in this scoping report, HCRI, UK-Med and Save the Children identify the need for a galvanising platform for action.

Adapting the aid system to the increased demands posed by climate change requires decisive action. To date, action is often slow, ad-hoc, and reactive.

A galvanising platform is required to empower, inspire and inform organised action to address the climate change 'Code Red' facing the global community. Through advocacy and resources, the aid system has made vast improvements addressing cross-cutting issues, such as the unequal impact of crises on women and girls. A platform for action supports the above seven recommendations through:

1. **Information and research:** Understanding complex climate impacts, developing new approaches to gathering and applying knowledge to humanitarian response, and implementing frameworks for essential practical action.
2. **Resources for response:** Improving funding, building greater response capacity at local levels, and providing rapid access to essential supplies.
3. **Advocacy and policy engagement:** Magnifying the voices of those most affected by the climate emergencies and transforming the aid system to be climate ready.

Contributors

The Sounding the Siren Report is a collaboration between UK-Med, Humanitarian and Conflict Response Institute (University of Manchester), Save the Children UK, with funding from the Disasters Emergency Committee.

The research team interviewed more than 30 aid workers involved with strategy, planning and operations, based at headquarters and in the field. The interviewees worked UN-based or UN-affiliated organisations, the Red Cross and Red Crescent movement, and humanitarian organisations working across different sectors of health, water and sanitation, food security, conflict and migration, shelter and education and protection. Respondents represented different genders and nationalities.