



## How can impact assessments increase the effectiveness of humanitarian programming in an uncertain climate?

Climate variability and change pose the greatest threat where natural systems are severely degraded and governance systems are failing. As a result, the most immediate impacts are often on the poorest of the poor requiring humanitarian response and risk reduction. On November 15, 2010, USAID and the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) convened a special session for 40 development, environment and humanitarian professionals to identify innovative and practicable solutions to programming challenges at the intersection of climate change and humanitarian assistance. To address these challenges, the session integrated expertise across areas such as climate change adaptation, environmental protection, environmental and social impact assessment, disaster risk reduction, humanitarian response, and pro-poor poverty reduction. Further, participants considered ways in which practitioners might better use impact assessments as a tool to outline possible synergies and trade-offs for achieving program objectives while mitigating potential economic, environmental and social impacts. Session participants were from USAID, the World Bank, a range of humanitarian and conservation non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and private sector representatives<sup>1</sup>. The results were presented out at the International Association of Impact Assessment (IAIA) Symposium on Climate Change and Impact Assessment (November 16, 2010; World Bank, Washington DC).

The event was organized into three working sessions:

- Disaster Response and Impact Assessments for a Changing Climate: Current Challenges
- Disaster Risk Reduction and Impact Assessments for a Changing Climate: Current Challenges
- Over the Horizon: Linking Disaster Response, Disaster Risk Reduction and Impact Assessment: Emerging Challenges from Climate Change

Each session began with two brief presentations by practitioners from agencies and organizations including USAID, the World Bank, and WWF to stimulate discussion. Geoff Dabelko of the Environmental Change and Security Program at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars (Washington DC) then moderated discussions around four key questions:

- What do we know? What don't we know?
- What are we already doing?
- What are the policy implications of our knowledge and actions?
- What are the implementation implications of our knowledge and actions?

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<sup>1</sup> Participant list is attached.

## Summary of Discussion

The discussion around these topics was wide-ranging, but cohered around a number of key themes. The first of these was the **need for greater connection between the humanitarian assistance community and the wider development community, especially those development experts focused on climate change adaptation**. We know that there are deep reserves of knowledge and experience related to risk and vulnerability reduction in the humanitarian, environmental, climate change, and development communities, but these communities are poorly connected. As a result, relief and recovery projects often fail to have long-term benefits that mitigate future risk and vulnerability, leading to cyclical humanitarian intervention. The issue of climate change could be a critical means of building this connection to address these challenges, for example by presenting the opportunity to incorporate capacity building for emergency response (a long term effort) into recovery/risk reduction programming by connecting disaster risk reduction (DRR) to adaptation. Impact assessment might be a key means of building this connection, for example by using the National Environmental Policy Act<sup>2</sup> (NEPA) environmental impact assessment process to bridge interdisciplinary gaps and foster cross-sector planning processes. Through such linkages, we might create forward-thinking disaster recovery and risk reduction planning and build successful, functional development at multiple scales - from communities up to the level of regions and countries.

The second key issue was closely related: **the need to build multidisciplinary impact assessment tools** to improve program and project outcomes at the intersection of humanitarian assistance and climate change. We already employ many different types of assessment tools, ranging from environmental impact assessments to conflict assessments, in our design processes. However, these tools and their findings are rarely integrated, leaving programs and projects exposed to challenges from unexamined impacts and stresses. We also know that communities normally undertake a wide range of activities to reduce their risk, and to recover from disasters. Therefore, if we are to serve a more meaningful purpose in the context of climate change, our impact assessment must capture a wide range of ongoing risk producing and risk reducing activities and factors, ranging from environmental impacts to the assessment of conflict potential and gender inequality. However, the integration of different assessment tools presents significant challenges. For example, such integration should not result in an assessment process that stacks ever-greater burdens on programs and project designers as new challenges are recognized, as this creates incentives to treat such assessments as a box to check (and often forget) in the design process. Such approaches raise concerns for staff capacity - both in terms of availability and training to conduct integrated assessments.

One means of managing the challenge of ever-expanding assessment requirements is to recognize that **vulnerability, as a concept, has little actionable meaning outside of particular contexts**. The humanitarian assistance community is acutely aware of the fact that reducing vulnerability requires understanding locally-specific factors that contribute to particular types of vulnerability. This awareness can be harnessed to address some of the challenges of integrated assessment posed above. By developing context-specific understandings of vulnerability, we can build locally-relevant, comprehensive impact assessments. These assessments will be bounded by local needs, and therefore avoid piling excessive and unnecessary demands on staff resources. At the same time, there will be a shared

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.epa.gov/compliance/nepa/>

understanding of vulnerability which can be addressed more comprehensively through multiple channels by different actors and technical sectors.

At a practical level, there are several key issues that require attention. First, **we are often restricted in how we can implement integrated programming because of conditions imposed by different types of funding and/or restrictions.** To facilitate on-the-ground projects that do a better job of integrating climate change concerns into disaster relief and risk reduction efforts, we must develop better means of demonstrating the results of climate change funding in this arena – especially when those results are spread across several projects or program areas.

Second, **there is not enough data available on climate change at the local and sub-regional levels, where development and humanitarian assistance practitioners most need it.** It is therefore difficult to facilitate the integration of climate change concerns into program and project design. There is potential to address this issue by gathering qualitative data on climate change at the community level, and by investing in new tools to provide better climate-related information at these critical scales.

Third, it is important to note that data availability is not the only barrier to integrating climate change information into program and project design. We often find that **there is limited institutional capacity for using such data in design or planning, and often implementers are unaware of available data or how to get it.** For example, even environment officers in major institutions are often not trained to include climate change in environmental assessment. There are also several instances of implementers and partners who use “black box” analysis solutions that make it very difficult to compare their findings and conclusions with those reached by other analyses in other places. To address this challenge, data analysis needs to become open sourced and publicly available, though pushing for this will impact some implementing partner’s revenues.

## Next Steps

The event identified several needs to improve programming and projects at the intersection of climate change and humanitarian assistance. First, **there is a need to identify and organize existing impact assessment tools** to highlight their availability to a wide audience and encourage cross-sectoral application of relevant guidance. These include NEPA (216) IEE, conflict assessments, and others. Second, **we need to pilot efforts to build integrated impact assessments for particular places** to learn how to build processes that capture relevant issues without overburdening staff and reducing such assessments to “check boxes”. Third, we need to **disseminate information on data availability and best practices for disaster risk reduction and emergency response planning.** Fourth, **we need to prioritize capacity-building** for institutions and individuals involved in emergency response and disaster risk reduction planning such that they can identify and use this data. This is particularly important at the community level, where adaptation to climate vulnerability is a continual process and therefore most effectively achieved.