

Waste produced by aid organisations

Network meeting: March 2015

Introduction

This meeting follows on from the Humanitarian Environment Network's meeting in October 2013 on the same topic. This first meeting had provided an opportunity to share experiences and practices in relation to waste management and to present the main ideas within the humanitarian community on this issue. The network members had expressed the need to carry out a pilot study in Haiti (which took place in November and December 2014). The initiatives presented at that meeting are listed in the factsheet on Waste Management from October 2013. http://www.urd.org/IMG/pdf/REH_-_summary_sheet_-_Waste_management.pdf

Topic overview

For a number of years the humanitarian sector has been concerned about the waste it produces during its programmes and in its internal functioning. Waste management raises issues of exemplarity and transparency. Taking this topic into account from the planning stage to the implementation of programmes can have an impact on the quality of programmes and whether or not they are accepted by local people.

A certain number of initiatives aiming to improve waste management practices have recently been implemented by aid organisations: MSF France's exporting of hazardous waste; the United Nations' "Greening the Blue" initiative; CEFREPADE's study on hazardous waste incinerators; etc. Waste prevention has also been identified as an important activity to be systematically included in organisations' programmes and internal functioning. There is a need to share these experiences in order to collectively learn from them.

Experiences

- **Pilot study by Groupe URD in technical partnership with CEFREPADE¹ on the issue of waste produced by aid organisations in Haiti, based on a recommendation from the Humanitarian Environment Network (<http://www.urd.org/Study-of-humanitarian-and>).**

The study showed that there were interesting recycling opportunities in Haiti for the humanitarian and development organisations working there (used engine oil, cardboard, plastic, electronic goods, etc.). Aid organisations therefore need to work with recycling businesses and waste collectors in order to reduce the quantity of untreated waste that is dumped.

¹ Centre Francophone de Recherche Partenariale sur l'Assainissement, les Déchets et l'Environnement - <http://www.cefrepade.org>

The study also underlined the importance of prevention and the choice of materials used during programmes (responsible purchasing) and the need to raise awareness internally about good practices.

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- **The United Nations' *Greening the Blue* initiative²**

A study was carried out looking at nine United Nations organisations working in 24 countries. The main conclusions were as follows:

- 1- Waste management is faced with certain difficulties in all United Nations country offices. The main challenges are:
 - Legislation and the limited application of the law;
 - The lack of facilities for recycling and safe disposal;
 - Low levels of awareness among individuals and institutions.
- 2- With regard to types of waste, there is a need to focus on hazardous waste as its final destination is often unknown. Lack of surveillance can be a serious problem for our organisations. What is more, a large proportion of hazardous waste is neither recycled nor reused. This is another area that needs to be improved.
- 3- However, despite the difficulties that exist, the study also showed that for almost all the challenges involved, there was at least one innovative solution implemented by an office somewhere in the world. The initiatives range from the recuperation of used engine oil, tyres and car batteries by workshops and garages to the donation of equipment and materials to local structures. Each of these good practices is the result of the proactive commitment and dedication of UN staff, and these, in turn, provide an opportunity for other United Nations organisations to learn.

A report describing these initiatives will be published and disseminated in due course.

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- **The issue of hazardous waste**

Hazardous waste (e.g. medical, used engine oil, electrical) requires specific treatment. Yet, in the majority of operational contexts, it is discarded in open air dumps leading to significant contamination that has a terrible impact on health and the environment.

➤ *MSF France in Haiti*

In early 2010, **MSF France** set up a pilot project in Haiti to re-export waste to the USA through a contract with Véolia. In total, 9 tonnes of hazardous waste produced by MSF's activities were collected over a period of 2 years (used engine oil, batteries, medical waste, etc.) and exported towards the USA. This operation cost MSF 48 000 USD. A new expedition is currently being prepared in Port-au-Prince

² The objective of this initiative is to make United Nations operations 'greener'.
<http://www.greeningtheblue.org>

and the organisation is looking to replicate this operation in other contexts. This initiative could potentially be opened up to include other NGOs present in Haiti.

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➤ *CEFREPADE*

The CEFREPADE has made recommendations that could be disseminated to NGOs regarding how to improve the way their hazardous waste is managed. It also established a bibliography on managing medical waste that is available on the Humanitarian Environment Network website.

There is also a strong desire within CEFREPADE to carry out research on incinerators in order to assess the real impact of incineration on the environment and to propose new technologies that are adapted to local contexts. Funding is currently being sought for a research project and bibliographic and comparative work has been carried out by CEFREPADE in order to find solutions that are adapted to the operational contexts where humanitarian organisations are present.

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➤ *Working group on hazardous waste led by the Joint Environment Unit and Norwegian Church Aid*

A working group on hazardous waste has recently been set up. The meetings take place online every 2/3 months, in English, with the aim of:

- improving understanding of the issue;
- understanding the obstacles in the way of better management of hazardous waste (within and between countries);
- establishing links with bodies that have developed solutions and drawing up a list of possible solutions;
- finding sustainable solutions to manage some or all hazardous waste.

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• **Packaging waste:**

Packaging waste poses a problem because it is generally no longer in the hands of humanitarian organisations (because it is produced following distributions to beneficiaries). It can be made up of plastic, metal (such as aluminium) or paper, and is sometimes non-recyclable, either due to its characteristics or because there is no local recycling sector.

Faced with this issue, it is essential to look at the quantity and nature of packaging that is planned in connection with distributions in order to reduce the quantity of waste and its harmfulness (e.g. burning plastic is very harmful for people's health). The issue of respecting local legislation was also raised with regard to the use of polystyrene boxes (food boxes) in Haiti despite the fact that this is against the law.

For almost ten years, NUTRISET has been looking into the environmental impact of using its products (Plumpy'Nut® which is used to reduce malnutrition). NUTRISET has conducted research and has taken steps to reduce its environmental impact: on the one hand, at the source, by reducing the amount of plastic in its packaging. And on the other hand, through a study and exploration of technical solutions for collecting and treating waste related to the consumption of its products in the field. Nutriset has

also worked on new packaging with a reduced environmental impact, but has been limited in this by existing supply networks.

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Prospects

The discussions once again underlined the difficulties related to the fact that this issue is not taken into consideration enough by organisations and the additional funding that is needed to establish environmentally-friendly waste management solutions and to raise awareness/ improve knowledge within NGOs.

The Humanitarian Environment Network would like to develop a project, steered by Groupe URD, to help humanitarian actors improve the way waste from programmes and logistics is managed. The project would involve the development of institutional solutions (advocacy vis-à-vis decision-makers, donors and coordination bodies), operational solutions (list of recommended treatment structures in the form of a self-powered online platform, technical notes listing good practices) and pedagogical solutions (facilitation, awareness-raising, experience-sharing workshops, etc.).

More information about this topic

Joint Environnement Unit: <http://www.unocha.org/what-we-do/coordination-tools/environmental-emergencies>

OCHA/UNEP Report on the Environment in Humanitarian Action, 2014:
http://www.urd.org/IMG/pdf/EHA_Study_web_version1-1.pdf