

COMMON DONOR GREENING PRIORITY ACTIONS



PRIORITY ACTION 4 Incorporate environmentally sustainable waste management.

February 2026

Waste management is a critical issue in countries receiving humanitarian assistance, owing to the significant volumes of waste generated by humanitarian operations - whether from packaging materials or from relief items that no longer serve their intended purpose and are subsequently discarded. This challenge is further exacerbated by the absence of, or weaknesses in, waste management infrastructure and services in humanitarian contexts, often due to disruption caused by conflict or crisis. Responsible and sustainable management of humanitarian waste can help prevent air, soil, and water pollution, while also preserving biodiversity and safeguarding human health.

There is no “one-size-fits-all” solution to waste management in humanitarian settings; approaches frequently depend on the resources and capacities of individual humanitarian organisations, the availability and affordability of appropriate waste management solutions, and the presence of existing, operational infrastructure. Although improving the management of waste generated by humanitarian assistance can be challenging, it remains a fundamental requirement for organisations and a core component of the “Do No Harm” principle. When designing waste management solutions, the following hierarchy (known as the “5R Hierarchy”) should be used: reducing, reusing, recycling, repurposing, and responsible disposal.



KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

Reduce waste *upstream* as much as possible by:

- ✓ Conducting precise needs assessments and procuring only what is required (“right-sizing” at source), minimising over-procurement and resource waste.
- ✓ Managing stocks effectively to reduce waste from expired or damaged stocks.
- ✓ Purchasing higher-quality, more durable products and those that can be repaired locally - if spare parts and required skills are available.
- ✓ Purchasing items that can be reused and undertaking awareness-raising activities with local communities to ensure that these items are effectively and consistently reused.
- ✓ Reducing packaging as much as possible on condition that this does not compromise the quality of the item (*see PA5 Guidance Note on reducing Single Use Plastics*).
- ✓ Prioritising products with sustainable packaging where packaging is needed for protection.

Facilitate downstream waste management by:

- ✓ As a minimum, humanitarian organisations should ensure that waste arising from their programmes and offices is managed by local/regional waste management companies - including small-scale waste actors or enterprises - that do not engage in illegal dumping or burning, and that disposal sites are properly controlled and securely fenced. Where larger waste management companies are involved, compliance can be reinforced through the inclusion of clear contractual clauses and/or by carrying out site visits to their premises and operating facilities.
- ✓ Organising for relevant waste streams (e.g. plastic, metal, and glass) to be segregated and collected separately for recycling at designated locations, such as humanitarian aid distribution centres or health facilities.
- ✓ Carrying out awareness-raising activities to build local understanding about waste segregation and disposal.
- ✓ Limiting the purchase of products composed of multiple materials, as these are technically challenging to recycle due to the need for separate recycling processes for each material.
- ✓ Identifying appropriate end-of-life disposal opportunities per waste stream in line with local waste management regulations. The WREC¹ Coalition mapping referred to below reveals that waste management - including recycling - opportunities exist in numerous humanitarian contexts, but that companies are often concentrated in capital cities. Transport of waste to these sites can be facilitated by setting up reverse logistics processes.
- ✓ Where possible, identify local e-waste recycling capacity prior to procurement of electronics.
- ✓ For organic waste (including food scraps, yard waste, agricultural waste or manure) simple composting setups can be employed to divert methane-causing gas from landfills and create nutrient-rich fertiliser.
- ✓ Collect and store hazardous waste (including e-waste, garage waste, chemical and medical waste) carefully prior to disposal, to prevent contamination and minimise health risks.
- ✓ Pooling waste management solutions between organisations. Explore opportunities to mutualise collection of waste from your offices and warehouses jointly other actors - a measure which may also generate savings (*See examples of pooled waste management solutions piloted by Hulo below*).



KEY RESOURCES

Joint Environment Initiatives (JEIs) on waste management

- **Organisation responsible:** HULO
- **Short description:** Initiatives aimed at pooling waste management resources and efforts across organisations. These approaches are particularly relevant for organisations seeking solutions for the management of hazardous waste. Examples include the pooling of e-waste transport in the DRC, Iraq, and Burkina Faso.
- **Accessibility:** English, French.

¹ WREC stands for Waste management and measuring, Reverse logistics, environmentally sustainable procurement and transport, and Circular economy. Coordinated by the Global Logistics Cluster, the WREC Coalition includes the Danish Refugee Council, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, Save the Children International and the UN World Food Programme.

Guidance on the operationalisation of the minimum environmental requirements and recommendations for EU-funded humanitarian aid operations (Section on Waste pages 23-28)

- **Organisation responsible:** DG ECHO
- **Short description:** Detailed guidance on sustainable management of solid waste and chemicals in humanitarian settings.
- **Accessibility:** English

Mapping of Waste Recycling Infrastructures in Humanitarian Operations

- **Organisation responsible:** WREC Coalition
- **Short description:** Online, interactive map providing information on existing country waste management and recycling facilities in humanitarian settings. Data such as the type of waste accepted, contact details and information on the recycling process is provided.
- **Accessibility:** English.

Managing waste sustainably: lessons learnt from humanitarian organisations

- **Organisation responsible:** The Joint Initiative for Sustainable Humanitarian Assistance Packaging Waste Management
- **Short description:** Compendium of case studies on the management of waste including single-use plastic (SUP) packaging. It draws on the experiences of humanitarian organisations that have eliminated or reduced the use of SUP in their programmes through behaviour change initiatives or the adoption of alternative solutions.
- **Accessibility:** English.

Sustainable management of ICRC's garage waste

- **Organisation responsible:** ICRC
- **Short description:** Guidance on how to manage garage waste including used oil, filters and used batteries. It introduces the notion of a traffic light system to help practitioners manage waste sustainably.
- **Accessibility:** English.

Managing Solid Waste: Sector-Specific Guidelines for the Red Cross Red Crescent

- **Organisation responsible:** IFRC and Swedish Red Cross
- **Short description:** Sector-specific guidance on how to manage waste generated by humanitarian operations.
- **Accessibility:** English.

Technical fact sheet on hazardous waste

- **Organisation responsible:** Climate Action Accelerator
- **Short description:** Guidance and resources to support practitioners in understanding the risks associated with poor management of hazardous waste (e.g. batteries, medical waste, e-waste, and refrigerant gases), and in exploring responsible and sustainable approaches to the collection, storage, and disposal of such waste
- **Accessibility:** English.



PITFALLS TO AVOID

- Avoid seeing recycling as the answer: Recycling rates for plastic do not exceed 9% of plastics consumed globally.² These are even lower in humanitarian contexts where infrastructure is limited, and recycling solutions are concentrated on PET/HDPE plastics, paper, cardboard and

² Global Plastics Outlook, OECD, 2022 https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/global-plastics-outlook_de747aef-en.html

steel, with very few recycling opportunities for light and flexible plastics such as cling-film. Recycling also *creates* emissions from transport, energy use, and processing. Reducing waste should be the first line of action.

- Do not rely on “quick-fix” solutions: Organisations may be tempted to seek simple substitutions - i.e. replacing one material with another to reduce waste - rather than rethinking the underlying practices. For example, organisations may focus on finding “alternatives” to virgin plastic (such as biobased plastics) which are not necessarily more environmentally sustainable³, rather than addressing the broader issue of single-use cultures within humanitarian action.
- Do not create parallel waste management systems. In practice, humanitarian waste streams are closely linked to domestic or community waste, and in many contexts some form of local waste authority or infrastructure already exists, even if it is weak or under-resourced. Small-scale waste enterprises are also often active, revalorising waste, including that generated by humanitarian operations. Establishing separate systems can lead to duplication, higher costs, community confusion, and missed opportunities to strengthen local capacity. Instead, humanitarian actors should engage with local authorities to identify ways to support and improve existing waste management infrastructure and services.



GOOD PRACTICES

- Exchange with and learn from other organisations, for example engaging with the [WREC Waste Management Coordination Group](#), [Hulo](#) or the [REH Waste Working Group](#).
- Reflect internally to see what adjustments can be made to procurement to *reduce waste at source* e.g. reducing or eliminating packaging, purchasing in bulk, choosing products with a longer life span or procuring reusable and repairable items (*see also PA2 Guidance Note on Sustainable Procurement*).
- Identify greener items that can be procured in large quantities (including through joint procurement), bearing in mind that it may be easier for suppliers to adjust their products and processes for small orders.
- When procuring and distributing reusable products such as buckets or jerricans, ensure that these items are genuinely reused to achieve the intended environmental impact. This requires effective awareness-raising activities and meaningful community engagement.
- Take particular care to collect, store and manage hazardous waste to reduce impact on human health and on the environment.
- Identify solutions for different waste streams in line with existing regulations and by working with local authorities in charge of waste management. The latter may, for instance, hold lists of certified waste management/recycling companies with which organisations can partner.
- Anticipate financial implications of adequate waste management in funding proposals and discuss these with your donor.
- Establish a waste management plan for offices and at project level, clearly laying out how each waste stream will be managed.

The INSPIRE+ Consortium is made up of IECAH, ODI, FAIREPROD and Groupe URD. It provides the Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (DG ECHO) with support in developing its policies via research, training, workshops and the dissemination of findings.

³ Plastic Pollution Coalition, <https://www.plasticpollutioncoalition.org/blog/2023/8/3/bioplastics-are-not-the-solution-to-plastic-pollution>