Joint Position Paper

Staff from ADRA Mali discussing NEAT+ results
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SAVE OUR NEAT+

Safeguarding Environmental Standards in Humanitarian Action

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Abstract

Humanitarian action is increasingly shaped by climate and environmental risks, yet the tools needed to assess and manage these risks are being weakened. Established instruments such as the **Nexus Environmental Assessment Tool (NEAT+)**—a widely used environmental screening tool—are at risk due to funding cuts and shifting priorities. This undermines project quality, increases long-term costs, and raises risks for avoidable environmental harm. As a field-tested, user-friendly and standardised tool, NEAT+ plays a critical role in mainstreaming environmental considerations in humanitarian action. Without sustained support, the sector risks fragmentation, loss of expertise, and declining environmental standards. This paper calls on donors, leading humanitarian organisations, and policy makers to secure NEAT+ as a core humanitarian instrument by assigning dedicated, multi-year funding and advancing coordination mechanisms for its unified development.

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SAVE OUR NEAT+

Why this joint position paper?

Humanitarian action is increasingly delivered in contexts shaped by climate change, environmental degradation, and growing resource scarcity. These pressures directly hit crisis-affected communities and play a key role in determining whether humanitarian interventions are effective, sustainable, and able to uphold the principle of 'Do No Harm'. At the same time, expectations from donors and policy frameworks for environmentally responsible humanitarian action are on the rise.

Yet, at precisely this critical moment, practical tools such as NEAT + that enable humanitarian actors to systematically identify and address environmental risks are being weakened. Funding cuts and shifting priorities have led to the discontinuation of this well-established environmental screening tool, as evidenced by the recent disappearance of Urban NEAT+ from public access. This development is not merely technical—it undermines planning quality, weakens environmental safeguards, and risks reversing years of progress in greening humanitarian action.

This paper is authored by an informal working group of German NGOs working in humanitarian action. As direct users of environmental screening and assessment tools, we represent the practitioner perspective: Organisations whose local staff, partner organisations and communities are directly affected by the loss of reliable, accessible instruments, while environmental and climatic hazards continue to intensify. Based on our operational experience across sectors and regions, we observe that environmental impacts remain insufficiently assessed in project planning—not due to lack of awareness, but to insufficient practical, user-friendly tools and sustained support structures.

The erosion of tools such as NEAT+ also entails a loss of institutional knowledge and capacity built over many years through training, system integration, and shared learning. This potentially leads to a fragmented landscape of ad-hoc approaches, reduced comparability between projects, and declining environmental standards across humanitarian operations.

The imperative of Greening Humanitarian Action

Humanitarian action must not come at the expense of the environment. The principle of **'Do No Harm'** applies equally to people and ecosystems, particularly in fragile contexts where environmental degradation directly undermines livelihoods and resilience—which are disproportionately often contexts in which crises that demand humanitarian interventions occur. This is why the 'Do No Harm' principle has been explicitly complemented by the environmental component in several publications such as the Inter-Agency Standing Committee's (IASC) Guidance on Environmental Responsibility in Humanitarian Operations in 2023 or more recently in the joint position paper **'Do No Environmental Harm'** in July 2025 by ADRA Germany, Help, Malteser International and World Vision.

Over the past years, tools such as NEAT+ have made it possible to systematically integrate environmental safeguards into humanitarian programming. Yet, recent funding cuts and shifting priorities are putting these standards at risk.

Rolling back environmental requirements is not a neutral decision. It leads to significant, yet avoidable harm, higher long-term costs, and reduced effectiveness of aid. Environmental protection must therefore remain a non-negotiable component of humanitarian action, supported through dedicated and sustained funding.

This document is addressed to international humanitarian donors and policy makers. Its purpose is to raise awareness of the current situation's consequences, to highlight the strategic relevance of NEAT+ as an enabling tool for responsible humanitarian action, and to advocate for renewed, dedicated support to safeguard, stabilize, and further develop this widely used tool with significant potential.

What is NEAT+?

The Nexus Environmental Assessment Tool (NEAT+) is a free and open-source, rapid, user-friendly project-level environmental screening tool. It was developed by both humanitarian and environmental actors, namely the UNEP/OCHA Joint Environment Unit, USAID, UNHCR, NRC, IUCN, WWF and other partners. It allows humanitarian actors to quickly identify environmental concerns during the design of emergency or recovery interventions.

NEAT+ is built up of a sensitivity module to collect general information on geography, targeted population etc. for each project, and selectable activity modules for different humanitarian key sectors including WASH, Shelter, Food Security, while covering cross-cutting issues related to energy, procurement and waste management. The integration of a Health module was planned and in the making when the tool's further development was halted. Before the USAID shutdown, there were two versions, the excel-based Rural NEAT+ and the server-based Urban NEAT+, which also contained a section on livelihoods. The latter version has disappeared from the OCHA server without any prior notification to the tool's users.

Usable by non-experts, NEAT+ produces standardised outputs and suggests specific mitigation measures. These measures require contextual review, prioritisation, and technical judgement before being integrated into project design. Despite its limitations, the utility of the tool is widely recognised among practitioners.

From Commitment to Implementation

The 'Do No Harm' principle requires the systematic integration of environmental considerations into humanitarian action across the project cycle. This is increasingly reflected in policies and donor requirements but remains uneven in the project implementation and depends highly on the capacity of organisations and their staff.

Humanitarian action is mostly characterised by urgency, limited and already targeted resources and competing priorities. Therefore, environmental aspects are often insufficiently assessed and addressed. The cause is not a lack of recognition, but of technical expertise and practical, accessible tools that enable humanitarian actors to translate environmental commitments into concrete action.

Although it is not the only tool for environmental screening in humanitarian action, NEAT+ has been the most widely used and recognised one over the past years. The ability to support project staff in identifying environmental risks early and systematically and to translate the findings into concrete mitigation measures and recommendations is highly valuable.

The tool allows screenings to be conducted within a short timeframe, ranging from a few hours to a couple of days, depending on context and urgency, without necessarily requiring specialised environmental expertise, although it is an asset. It can be applied by project managers or MEAL officers in close coordination with project staff, local stakeholders and other actors. This makes it very suitable for humanitarian contexts, when decisions must often be taken quickly by staff without dedicated environmental backgrounds. The tool can additionally be complemented by more in-depth assessments, where required, with support from environmental experts. By enabling

Staff from ADRA Germany during a NEAT+ exercise
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both non-specialists and technical experts to engage with environmental risks, NEAT+ supports the mainstreaming of environmental sensitivity and responsibility across organisations.

While being extremely useful, NEAT+ is also far from being perfect. Users claim a tangible North-South bias[1], suggested measures based on very scarce data, missing integration of spatial information which makes it rather unsuitable for land use-related projects, and the absence of important areas such as the health sector, just to name a few. The tool is only available in English, French and Spanish, which excludes a huge part of potential users.

In order to bridge the gaps left by NEAT+, other, sometimes complementary tools have been developed, such as the Multi-sectoral matrix of Environmental Risk Analysis and mitigation measures (MERA matrix) developed by the Réseau Environnement Humanitaire (REH) and launched in 2024, or the Climate, Environment and Disaster Risk Reduction Integration Guidance (CEDRIG) provided by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, which is suitable for humanitarian as well as development projects. The community of practice is a hub for innovation and the development of new approaches and tools for improving the quality of humanitarian action.

Making Environmental Risks Visible

A challenge in humanitarian settings is that environmental impacts and risks are often unseen, underestimated or even ignored during project planning. The negative consequences may appear later during the project implementation and sometimes only after its completion.

NEAT+ addresses this problem by providing a structured approach to identify environmental impacts and risks at an early stage. The screening can assess typical risks like the overuse and depletion of natural resources, such as groundwater or wood; poor waste management potentially causing environmental and public health risks; or reliance on fossil fuels, resulting in higher greenhouse gas emissions and operational costs. Negative impacts may appear in-situ at the project site but also ex-situ elsewhere on the globe, e.g. when related to unsustainable supply chains.

By making these risks visible during project planning, NEAT+ enables humanitarian actors to adapt the

NEAT+ in action: User's perspectives

Across the globe, users report that NEAT+ strengthens environmental awareness, improves project design, and supports more resilient humanitarian interventions. It provides clear, actionable mitigation measures that improve, for instance, WASH project quality and decision-making. Practitioners worldwide confirm that the tool shows strong potential for broader use, with opportunities to further tailor it to diverse contexts and other sectors through improved translation and contextual adaptation.[2]

Users from Myanmar, for example, state that NEAT+ reveals overlooked environmental risks, helping teams design safer and more sustainable projects, and that the use of the tool enhances community ownership, improving understanding of how daily practices affect the environment. *"The NEAT+ assessment helped us see how our daily behaviours impact the environment. With the project team's guidance, we are exploring better ways to meet our needs without harming our surroundings"*, states a community member in a project from arche nova.

Ethiopian users state that NEAT+ is highly applicable and beneficial for humanitarian work in their local context mainly because of its time efficiency, effectiveness in terms of financial and human resources, and the meaningful and important information it provides.

Finally, after getting in touch with NEAT+, partner organisations in Mali and Chad decided to integrate it as a standard tool into their environmental policies.

[1] NEAT+ has been developed disproportionately with examples from Sub-Saharan Africa, where its results are consequently the most accurate.

[2] From the ECT WASH Digital Library: https://didrrn.net/ect-wash-digital-library/#lessonslearned

Inclusive Rainwater Harvesting in Bangladesh
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project design accordingly and reduce environmental as well as overall project risks. The strategy and mitigation solutions suggested by NEAT+ may include selecting alternative technologies or nature-based solutions, adjusting implementation strategies, or integrating mitigation measures such as waste management systems, sustainable energy solutions and supply chains or resource protection strategies like environmental education.

Furthermore, using NEAT+ increases participation and ownership among project staff, stakeholders and communities in the quest for context-specific solutions. The exchange necessary to fill in and analyse the data, discuss, complete and prioritise the suggested measures and edit the report raises environmental awareness and knowledge and, ideally, interest.

Addressing environmental risks at the design stage is far more effective and cost-efficient than reacting to negative impacts at a later stage. Preventive measures do not only reduce environmental harm but also contribute to the overall quality, sustainability, and acceptance of humanitarian interventions. In this sense, environmental screening should not be seen as an additional requirement, but as an integral part of humanitarian action.

Standardisation and Improved Decision-Making

Currently, environmental assessments are conducted using a wide range of approaches other than NEAT+. Apart from few recognised ones such as the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies' (IFRC) Green Response: Environmental Quick Guide, MERA or CEDRIG, some organisations have developed their own tools, others rely on simple checklists or do not conduct environmental screenings at all. This leads to varying levels of quality and hampers the comparability of environmental risks across projects and organisations.

The lack of a shared methodology and a systematic approach for environmental assessments poses a

challenge for both implementing organisations and donors. While one organisation might flag a number of risks due to a comprehensive screening, others might submit proposals with little or no environmental risk analysis due to the absence of an environmental screening. This results in a situation where environmental considerations are not being consistently reflected in funding decisions and where projects without an environmental checkup might even seemingly carry less potential harm.

NEAT+ offers standardisation and improves the comparability of project proposals across different contexts and organisations. For donors, it creates options for more transparent and efficient decision-making while strengthening mutual accountability. At the same time, the use of a shared tool enables the aggregation of data across projects. This offers opportunities to create knowledge on recurring environmental risks and to inform more strategic approaches to greening humanitarian action. In addition, the data can support the development of evidence-based greening strategies and enable continuous learning.

Strengthening Capacity in a Changing Funding Environment

Recent funding cuts in the humanitarian sector worldwide have led to declining financial resources. This has resulted in a loss of environmental expertise, as many organisations reduce technical positions, leading to a decline of institutional knowledge and capacity.

This trend increases the importance of practical tools that can support staff in addressing environmental issues. NEAT+ contributes to this by enabling project and MEAL personnel to conduct environmental screenings independently and maintain at least a minimum standard of environmental considerations, even in the absence of dedicated experts.

Nevertheless, it is important to understand that tools like NEAT+ cannot fully replace technical specialists, but allow better mitigation strategies, environmental planning and therefore sustainable project results when combined with technical expertise. To ensure meaningful environmental integration, NEAT+ must be supported by appropriate training and guidance for staff as well as integration into organisational processes and donor requirements.

Further, the use of NEAT+ supports mainstreaming and capacity building on topics of ecological sustainability within organisations and partner structures. The tool opens new perspectives for staff members, who gain a better understanding of environmental risks, mitigation measures and their relevance to project outcomes.

Continued demand despite uncertain support

Despite the described ruptures, NEAT+ remains the object of numerous capacity building efforts. The European Commission's Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (DG ECHO) for instance continues to fund and offer monthly online trainings in English, French and Spanish[3].

A new capacity building project for local humanitarian actors called 'Environmental and Climate Mainstreaming in Humanitarian Action', funded by the same DG ECHO and implemented by the Norwegian Refugee Council, the Danish Refugee Council and the Svenska Röda Korset, has started in the beginning of 2026. The project targets almost 1,500 persons in 21 countries with a localisation approach *"via on-site training activities (Training of Trainers and technical trainings) to enable contextualized climate and environmental risks management process"*. 850 of these local humanitarian actors are supposed to be trained on NEAT+ over the course of 21 months.[4]

The ongoing efforts as well as human and financial resources allocated to these activities speak volumes on the importance of standardised tools in general and NEAT+ in particular.

[3] https://www.dgecho-partners-helpdesk.eu/learning-and-trainings

[4] NRC, DRC and Röda Korset Concept Note: Environmental and Climate Mainstreaming in Humanitarian Action

Call for Action

In light of the above:

- We call upon **humanitarian donors**, particularly those requiring environmental compliance, to provide dedicated, multi-year funding to safe-guard, maintain, and further develop NEAT+ up to its potential as a core component of humanitarian infrastructure.
- We call upon **policy makers** to formally recognise environmental screening tools such as NEAT+ as minimum standards for responsible humanitarian action and to ensure their systematic integration across funding mechanisms.
- We call upon **donors, UN agencies, and humanitarian organisations** to drive the future coordination and governance of NEAT+ to fill the gap left by UNEP/OCHA Joint Environment Unit (JEU)'s transition out of its role as custodian and to build on existing roadmaps, steering structures, and investments.
- We call upon the **humanitarian community** to strengthen joint ownership, harmonisation, and continued use of environmental assessment tools in order to prevent fragmentation and loss of capacity.

Without immediate action, the sector risks losing a widely used, field-tested tool and reversing years of progress in integrating environmental responsibility into humanitarian action.

Quo vadis, NEAT+?

As outlined, NEAT+ has already demonstrated its high practical value and wide acceptance in the humanitarian sector.

After the launch of Rural NEAT+ in 2019 and Urban NEAT+ in 2021, ongoing efforts and dedicated resources have been allocated to continue developing and maintaining the tool until the end of 2024. The initial plans of the NEAT+ Steering Committee included the integration of Urban and Rural NEAT+ in one tool, further alignment to ensure applicability across diverse contexts and geographical regions, the inclusion of a Health module and additional languages as well as linkages with related tools and frameworks, such as carbon accounting, where possible. The plans for 2025 could not be realised due to the suspension of funding, particularly the shutdown of USAID, which had been the key contributor to the further development and harmonisation of the tool. The expertise gathered around the tool–which are the numerous practitioners willing to contribute to its further improvement–is available and simply requires an enabling environment.

NEAT+ continues to inspire the further development of other resources such as the MERA matrix. At the very moment this paper is being edited, Action Against Hunger Spain is working on the combination of both MERA and NEAT+ in the so-called 'Environmental Risk Management Tool' (ERMT), which will be released shortly. These developments highlight once again the significant potential of NEAT+ for the humanitarian world, where increasingly diverse contexts need to be addressed. Each of the sectors—WASH, Shelter, Food Security, Livelihoods, Health et cetera—present specific environmental risks and require tailored mitigation approaches. Further developments will increase the relevance and usability of NEAT+ across the full spectrum of humanitarian action, while maintaining its strength as a free and open-source, rapid and context-specific screening tool.

At a time where both environmental risks and the expectations for eco-responsible humanitarian responses are on the rise, the sector risks losing one of its most practical and widely used instruments. Ensuring the sustainability and further development of NEAT+ is therefore essential—not only to support individual projects, but to enable the humanitarian system as a whole to effectively implement the principle of 'Do No (Environmental) Harm'.

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Supporting networks:

Aktion Deutschland Hilft – Bündnis der Hilfsorganisationen

Joint Initiative for Greener Humanitarian Assistance

REH Réseau Environnement Humanitaire

WASH Cluster – Water Sanitation Hygiene

WASH NETZWERK

Supporting organisations:

Acción Contra el Hambre

Action Contre la Faim

Aktion gegen den Hunger

ADRA – Burkina Faso, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Mali, Mozambique, Syria

A.F.A.D.

ANADI Burkina-Faso

Association Tin Tua

care – wirkt. weltweit.

CDD – Centre for Disability in Development – Bringing hope, dignity and meaning to life

Disaster Resilience LLC

ONG Nationale

Groupe URD

German Toilet Organization

handicap international – humanity & inclusion

HelpAge Deutschland – Alter ist Zukunft

ISGlobal

Lands Aid

Médecins du Monde International

solidarités international

OWDA – Organization for Welfare Development in Action

OXFAM Québec

People in Need

PLAN International – Gibt Kindern eine Chance

SIF

STS – Serving together for social development

SWRO – Social Women and Resilience Organization

Terre des hommes – Helping children worldwide.

Tierärzte ohne Grenzen e.V.

WARDI Relief