

JOINT INITIATIVE FOR SUSTAINABLE HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE PACKAGING WASTE MANAGEMENT

PACKAGING MATTERS WEBINAR SERIES

Episode 1: "The journey to sustainable packaging: synergies between humanitarian organizations and the private sector", Tuesday 18th October 2022

KEY MESSAGES

Introduction

This webinar presented examples of how private sector partners are helping humanitarian organizations to incorporate sustainability into their packaging, thereby reducing their environmental footprint and helping them to make savings.

Key messages

Private sector partners are drivers for change in terms of packaging sustainability and reducing environmental footprint

As demonstrated by the webinar, private sector actors are playing a leading role, alongside their humanitarian partners in making packaging more sustainable. The impetus for these changes has often come from the private sector itself rather than the humanitarian partners. Many of these alternatives help to keep material in circulation through recycling and composting and can lead not only to reduced GHG emissions/environmental footprints but also cost savings.

Packaging has a role to play

In the humanitarian context, the main function of packaging is to protect the life-saving assistance being provided. No or poor packaging leads to waste – of both resources used to produce the item and the materials used for the packaging itself. However, we need to find the “right packaging” and consider what we need it for exactly. We should use the waste hierarchy to consider whether we can refuse some types of packaging (e.g., single-use plastics), reduce the quantity of packaging used or find more sustainable materials which still perform the same function of protecting items, whilst taking into account – from the design state of the packaging - end of life considerations including recyclability, recovery, and repurposing.

Cost, lack of information on sustainable alternatives and lack of capacity in emergency contexts continue to pose challenges

When asked “What potential challenges are there in making humanitarian assistance packaging more sustainable”, partners selected, in order of priority cost, followed by the lack of guidance on sustainable packaging options, a lack capacity/time to consider sustainability particularly when operating in emergency contexts, followed by functionality (i.e., sturdy packaging is needed to protect items) and packaging preferences among beneficiaries of humanitarian assistance. The webinar helped to break down the idea that making packaging more sustainable is more expensive, by showing that simple changes can make packaging more sustainable and save costs, for example: reduced packaging can facilitate palletization optimization increased loading rates: this means that space in freight containers is optimized, leading to reduced costs and emissions.

It is challenging but not impossible to measure the waste we produce as humanitarian actors

Questions were raised during the webinar regarding the humanitarian sector’s efforts to measure the scale and impact of humanitarian assistance packaging and whether – by focusing on packaging waste – the Joint Initiative was not just tackling the most “visible” kind of waste.

As the [scoping study](#) which led to the development of the Joint Initiative points out “Humanitarian assistance needs are rising in parallel to another global crisis: solid waste management, which is one of the most urgent and underfunded global development challenges that is only expected to grow. In development assistance, only 0.3% of total funding is directed towards solid waste management (International Solid Waste Association (ISWA) 2014). The solid waste management crisis is particularly acute for countries or communities receiving humanitarian assistance that often lack sufficient infrastructure or management systems to handle solid waste generated by the assistance”¹.

Addressing the issue of humanitarian assistance packaging waste is therefore part of the humanitarian sector’s efforts to make procurement and supply chain delivery processes more environmentally sustainable.

Measuring the waste created by humanitarian operations is an underexplored area, and the **Joint Initiative is working with the WFP to fill this gap**, strengthening the knowledge base on the scale, use and impact of current humanitarian packaging waste.

To this end the types and weights of packaging used for food and NFIs were identified; procurement and distribution data was gathered from several humanitarian actors² and – using a new packaging assessment tool – an analysis was conducted to identify the most frequent and problematic types of packaging and to define the highest receiving countries of packaging based on distribution data where this was available. Such data can help to shape decision-making and better direct resources

- Making sound waste management decisions
- Mapping packaging waste hotspots
- Communicating with donors on needs

Data collection is ongoing, and organizations are encouraged [to get in touch and contribute their data](#).

Harmonization of technical specifications could promote environmental sustainability and cost-savings

At several points during the webinar, the question of sector-wide “sustainable” technical specifications of items and products including packaging was raised. It was noted that some actors have worked together to “green” their item specifications³ and work was also undertaken as part of the Joint Initiative to develop [sustainability criteria for packaging](#) (looking at the composition, type, size of packaging and sub packaging as well as issues such as after use and transport). However, standards still vary across the sector perhaps due to the need to strengthen communication.

If humanitarian actors were able to agree on standard packaging specifications, this would help ensure that issues such as sustainability of materials and palletization are incorporated upstream, and suppliers’ stock conforms to this and can be deployed rapidly across the board. In the context of the Ukraine war, one supplier reported that they had sometimes received different specifications (including on packaging) for the same items from 5 or 6 NGOs in the same week. Humanitarian partners were also encouraged to increase use of recycled cardboard in packaging, and to use black rather than colored ink for logos, noting that some actors are still insisting on bleached cardboard and colored (e.g. red) logos.

The Joint Initiative is working with the [WREC project](#)⁴ to map and document ongoing initiatives, working groups, networks, and platforms on Green Procurement and to ensure that they work together in coordination and the need for green specifications around packaging will be discussed as part of this work.

The landscape is changing

The landscape is changing for humanitarian actors, and it is important now, more than ever, to think about packaging sustainability. National and international legislation which is increasingly regulating the use, production, and end of life of plastics for example, which is directly impacting humanitarian operations. In

¹[Sustainability in humanitarian supply chains a preliminary scoping of improvements in packaging](#)

² WFP, UNICEF, ICRC and UNHCR

³ Work carried out, for example among IFRC, UNHCR, UNICEF, and ICRC to design greener relief items or the [Green Standard Products Catalogue for IFRC and ICRC](#)

⁴ [Waste management and measuring, reverse logistics, environmentally sustainable procurement and transport, and circular economy](#) (WREC) project

addition, donors are gradually requesting their humanitarian implementing partners to consider sustainability in packaging. For example, ECHO's minimum standards for sustainable supply chains include the requirement for partners to “Reduce and optimise secondary and tertiary packaging. Reduce or eliminate SUP bulk packaging and individual items with SUP wrap unless essential. Encourage biodegradable packaging, where possible”⁵.

I. Where to go for further information

Joint Initiative Documents

Guidance Note on Regulatory and Legislative Frameworks for Humanitarian Workers (plastics)
<https://tinyurl.com/JI-r-l-frameworks>

Packaging, Plastics and Climate Change Info Sheet: <https://tinyurl.com/JI-CC-FactSheet>

Case study “ShelterBox’s Success in Eliminating Single Use Plastic” - English version
<https://tinyurl.com/WFP-Ba-EN>, French version <http://tinyurl.com/ShelterBox-FR>

Case study “Plastic free e-voucher shops in Cox’s Bazar, Bangladesh” English version,
<https://tinyurl.com/WFP-Ba-EN>, French version <https://tinyurl.com/WFP-Ba-FR>

Joint Initiative Events



PACKAGING MATTERS
Webinar Series

JOINT INITIATIVE FOR SUSTAINABLE HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE PACKAGING WASTE MANAGEMENT

Episode 2 “Eliminating single-use plastics from packaging of NFIs: ShelterBox’s success story”.
6th December 2022, 15h-16h CET / 9h-10h EST

Connect to the Joint Initiative



- <https://tinyurl.com/Joint-Initiative>
- <https://tinyurl.com/Joint-Initiative-LinkedIn>
- <https://tinyurl.com/JInews-subscribe>

⁵ [ECHO’s minimum environmental requirements and recommendations for EU-funded humanitarian aid operations](#)