



8

# Disaster/Conflict Affected States and Vulnerable Humanitarian Operations

**NO UNCONTROLLED DUMPING,  
NO OPEN BURNING**

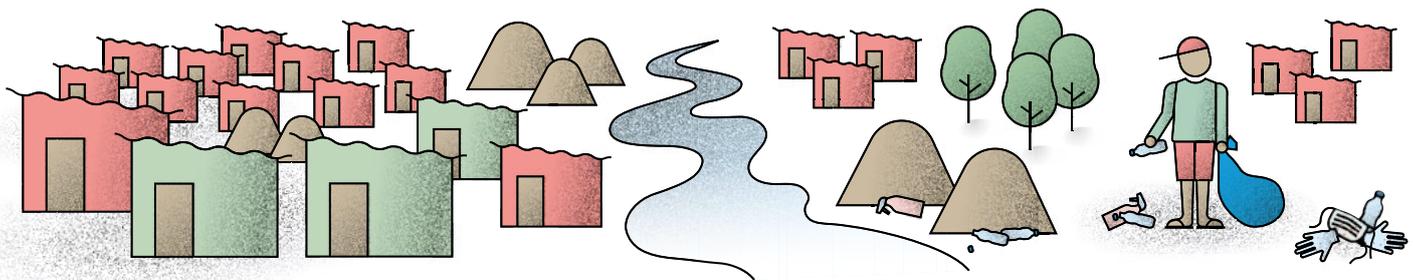
Protect the environment and our health

For more information visit [unep.org](http://unep.org) or contact **Kevin Helps** (Head, GEF Unit, Chemicals and Health Branch, UNEP) [kevin.helps@un.org](mailto:kevin.helps@un.org)

*“We know the virus is now arriving in some of the places least equipped to deal with it. Once there it will undoubtedly hit the most vulnerable hardest – including women, older people, people with disabilities, and refugees, migrants and displaced people.”*

Mark Lowcock, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator

## The problem



**Disaster and conflict affected countries and vulnerable humanitarian operations** (e.g. refugee/Internally Dispersed Persons camps) with limited capacity, poor infrastructure and resources are likely to face enormous problems in the event of COVID-19 spread. The need for safe, efficient and appropriate solutions for management of solid and hazardous contaminated wastes will increase greatly.

Many such countries **were already unable to use best practice in treating healthcare waste from hospitals**. The current outbreak now means that countries also have to cope with infectious household waste. How to manage this type of waste in the context of camps

and camp-like settings as well as informal settlements is of concern. **The informal waste management sector often fills in any gaps in governance** and is typically made up of some of the most vulnerable people (including refugees, migrants, slum dwellers and the urban poor) who are also most exposed to the virus, with child labour and gender disparities adding to the risk to vulnerable sectors of the population.

In all these contexts, the response to **COVID-19 has to go hand in hand with the humanitarian response** and there is a need to **ensure that environmental standards are not rolled back**.



Under this scenario, **management of infectious material** is often limited to small scale, low volume treatment options. The practice of disposing of this material at unsecured and non engineered dumpsites should be avoided. The open-burning and/ or “waste picking” of dumped material is often prevalent, resulting in the release of toxic chemicals (dioxins and furans) or the possible spread of infection.



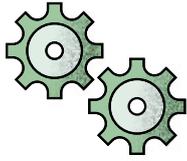
For COVID-19 waste such disposal solutions could represent **a high risk for over burden and potential cross infection**, and it is imperative that support and guidance is provided to help develop emergency solutions to counter this risk.

**Other waste streams are also likely to be generated by the COVID-19 response phase**. These include items such as hand sanitizer, hygiene kits, masks, and packaged food items replacing camp kitchens. Additional waste as a result of the creation/expansions of temporary shelters or barriers to meet isolation needs should also be managed.



COVID-19 is likely to lead to a **loss of environment-related livelihoods** for those employed in the informal waste management sector, with associated implications on protection especially for vulnerable groups, including women and children.

## Guidance



**Immediately develop best practice technologies (BAT)**, but rather introduce less suitable but workable stop-gap solutions to deal with the expected surge of waste under COVID-19. For more information, check the Factsheet on technologies.



While such solutions may remedy the immediate waste issue in a safer way than open dumping **they should nonetheless be considered short-term solutions**, that should be discontinued soon after the event or preferably superseded over the longer term by improved BAT for waste disposal.

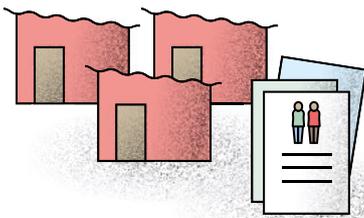


**Whenever possible, training and guidance should be given** to maintain or generate environmentally sound, emergency/ alternative livelihood opportunities for people likely to be affected by the pandemic. This should integrate considerations on protection of the most vulnerable, including people on the move, children and women, and informal waste workers.



**Consideration should be given on environmentally sound creation of additional shelter capacity** and reprogramming of humanitarian activities (cf. changes in supply of food and non-food items, resulting in increased waste generation), with a focus on the management of associated waste streams in camps/ camp-like settings and informal settlements.

## Facts



The COVID-19 Global Humanitarian Response Plan identifies the most affected and vulnerable population groups in **65 priority countries**. These include: **countries with an ongoing Humanitarian Response Plan, Refugee Response Plan or multi-country/subregional response plan**, as well as countries that have requested international assistance.

To date over **100 countries** are reporting **local transmission of COVID-19**. Of those, 34 countries have refugee populations exceeding 20,000 people (UNHCR).

## Way forward



**UNEP can support Member States and humanitarian actors by providing technical guidance and training** on the management of HCW and other COVID-19 associated waste streams, to minimize adverse health, environmental and livelihood impacts.

The lack of investment in and access to state of the art technology to effectively treat mixed contaminated medical waste will pose massive challenges to most developing countries. The current COVID-19 outbreak should be seen as a warning that:

- **More basic infrastructure and capacity to deal with medical-contaminated-waste**, in line with the requirements of the relevant Multilateral Environmental Agreements, are urgently needed.
- **Sustainable Assessment of Technologies (SAT)** for appropriate technology identification and comparison based on technical, social and environmental performances should be promoted.
- **Financial resources and mechanisms** for developing the infrastructure, and guidance on creating and accessing funding should be identified to support countries.