

The Humanitarian Environment Network

“Responsible” purchasing

Network meeting: October 2017

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1. **Introduction/context**

Through their activities, humanitarian NGOs have to make a certain number of purchases, such as medicines, office supplies, vehicles or distribution kits, both in the field and in their country of residence. The environmental impact of these purchases (waste, CO2 emissions, pollution, etc.) can affect the organisation’s image. Purchasing is an area where the negative environmental impacts of humanitarian action can be reduced significantly.

While certain NGOs have established environmental charters with their suppliers or have introduced environmental criteria in their calls for tender, this technical note aims to help you to consider the main issues when instigating a responsible purchasing policy.

2. **What are we talking about?**

Responsible purchasing has a number of facets: environmental, societal, ethical, etc., but the environment has been the main focus for some time. This will be the main aspect that we will be looking at here.

In the humanitarian sector, purchasing can have different environmental impacts. These different impacts need to be evaluated (by **mapping risks** by type of purchase) and choices need to be made depending on the main environmental issues in a given operational context. Purchases can have an impact on:

- **The availability of natural resources (e.g. wood/water in a desert zone)**
- **The amount of energy used (notably when using the product)**
- **CO2 emissions**

- **Soil/water table/ air pollution**
- **Waste production**

Our purchases can also have a social dimension, based on, for example, the working conditions in companies, child labour, etc.

3. Regulatory framework

The founding text on responsible purchasing (which includes green purchasing) for organisations and firms) is ISO 14 001, which was established in 1996 and ISO 50 001 on the efficient management of energy.

The French standard, NF X 50-135-1 and 2 (or sustainable purchasing standard), based on ISO 26000, was established in July 2012. The ISO 20400 standard for sustainable procurement was then introduced. The NF X standard focuses on practical aspects but it is still a standard and is therefore subject to interpretation. Though the standard recommends local actors, using more distant suppliers can sometimes be more appropriate.

International standard ISO 20400 for sustainable procurement was developed over a number of years by a number of actors, including France. It aims to combine social responsibility and responsible purchasing.

3. Questions to ask yourself when you are purchasing something (non-exhaustive list)

Waste
How long will the product I am buying last? Will I need to change it within a year?
Are refills available on site for this product?
Can the manufacturer or the seller provide a guarantee and take back the product if it is faulty?
Can the manufacturer take back the product once it has been used (e.g. ink cartridge)? How will they manage this waste?
Does the product have packaging?
If so, is the packaging 1) necessary, 2) recyclable in the country, or 3) biodegradable?
Can the product be reused by the population after the humanitarian response?
Is the product and its packaging made up of recyclable materials?

Pollution
Does the product include harmful components?
Has the product been treated with a toxic chemical?
Energy
Where does the product come from? Is it locally produced or is it imported? Warning: local purchasing is not necessarily the most environmentally friendly (e.g. it is preferable to import wood in Haiti to build a shelter rather than to buy it locally given the high level of deforestation in the country).
Has a lot of energy been used to make this product? (e.g. brick production requires a lot of energy) ¹
Does the product require energy for its use? What type of energy and what quantity?
Are there any alternatives that require less energy?
Is the product made of recycled materials?
General
Does the supplier have an environmental policy? (even though this does not concern the product that is being purchased, it is important to encourage this approach if it has been initiated by the supplier).
Is the product sold legally in the country? (e.g. expanded polystyrene is banned in Haiti but it continues to be sold).
Is there an environmental label for this type of product?

¹ Six large trees are needed to produce 10,000 bricks

4. Recommendations for adopting a responsible purchasing approach:

- Get the support of **top management** so that impetus is given to the whole organisation.
- It is easier to start by implementing a responsible purchasing policy **at your organisation's headquarters** because there are more suppliers than in the field (this will also increase acceptance in the field).
- Developing a common strategy amongst NGO in the even that you share the same suppliers (This can have more weight).
- A responsible purchasing policy should be implemented gradually. You should not try to do everything in one go. For example, you could start by:
 - Dealing with office equipment, because there are a lot of suppliers (as opposed to medicine, for example);
 - Introducing a responsible purchasing charter to be signed by suppliers, even if it is not binding, or practical Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) questionnaires to be filled in by suppliers
 - Including sustainable development criteria in calls for tender (with the same weight as other criteria).
- **Map risks by type of purchase.** Important: it is not necessarily the biggest purchases (in terms of quantity or price) that represent the biggest risks for the NGO
- Make choices **by comparing the negative impacts on the environment of each solution** based on the specific environmental issues for each context.
- **Train buyers and logisticians** before and during their missions. Underline the responsibility of the buyer in terms of taking the environment into account.
- **Accompany buyers in their "responsible" approach** (this is only possible if this is part of a medium- or long-term relationship).
- Carry out **supplier audits** by visiting factories that present the highest risks.
- Inform your **donors** about your approach.

5. SWOT² analysis for implementing a responsible purchasing policy

Strengths	Weaknesses
- A responsible purchasing policy can have a positive impact on the organisation's image among beneficiaries, donors and the public (organisations can be criticised for the bad practices of their suppliers).	- The difficulty of putting a policy of this kind into practice in an emergency context (priority of operational needs and lack of time and resources to analyse products). - Lack of environmental awareness among suppliers.

² Acronym for "Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats".

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Lack of alternatives (suppliers and products) applicable in certain contexts. - Difficulty of getting precise information about the origins or the contents of products in certain contexts.
<p>Opportunities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Begin by initiating a responsible purchasing policy at the organisation's headquarters. - Purchasing is a key area to improve the environmental footprint of an organisation and to influence suppliers and the end users of the products (showing an example). - Certain types of products have eco-labels (e.g. Green IT for the purchasing of computers, FSC³ label for wood). - Promoting local purchasing can stimulate the local economy (warning: buying local is not systematically the best option). 	<p>Threats</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - It is only possible to influence suppliers in the medium term. - Analysing products can take more time, which can be incompatible with the need to act quickly. - The view that responsible purchasing costs more.

Conclusion:

There is no single solution to evaluate the environmental performance of a supplier. The approach should be pragmatic and adapted to the reality of each operational context. The issue at stake is to ask the right questions and to make informed decisions to reduce the environmental impact of programmes. Adopting a responsible purchasing approach is a way of being exemplary and improving the quality of our programmes.

More:

- Green Reconstruction and Reconstruction Toolkit: Training module on the supply chain <http://envirodm.org/training/eng/green-guide-to-materials-and-the-supply-chain>
- Office equipment: Responsible purchasing platform for office supplies <http://www.ouilab.org/>
- Timber: <http://www.ifrc.org/PageFiles/95530/D.03.c.01.%20Timber%20Guidelines-EN.pdf>
- SIDA responsible purchasing policy: <https://www.sida.se/globalassets/global/partners/procurements/sidapolgreenproc.pdf>

³ Forest Stewardship Council