



Climate change and organisational strategy A practical guide for charity CEOs

“We’re not yet ready for what’s already happened. We have extreme difficulty even discussing what is coming.” - Alex Steffen, Climate Futurist

This article provides a framework to assist charity CEOs in anticipating the social impact of climate change for service-users and the organisation - and how to integrate those findings into strategic planning.¹

We’ve all seen the extreme weather report on the news, but it is hard for us to grapple with what climate change could REALLY mean in the lives of the people that we serve and therefore how we should plan for it.

Initial inequality makes disadvantaged groups suffer disproportionate loss and the social and economic impacts of climate change often go together. If someone can’t get to a job because the infrastructure is too badly damaged or if she’s struggling to afford rising food costs or has no electricity, then this affects her ability to support herself and family, leading to increased poverty and then a higher vulnerability to the consequences of future climate change-related problems.

In the language of the UN, “there are three main channels through which the inequality-aggravating effect of climate change materializes: (a) increase in the exposure of the disadvantaged groups to the adverse effects of climate change; (b) increase in their susceptibility to damage caused by climate change; and (c) decrease in their ability to cope and recover from the damage suffered”

In other words, the most vicious of circles. For most charities, these disadvantaged groups are Our People. We need to consider the knock-on effects, such as

- What could the impact of flooding, or excessive snowfall and high winds be for those organisations supporting the homeless? Or providing face to face mental health counselling services? For child literacy programmes that require access to Wi-Fi and a computer?
- What would the impact of worsening food security be on a food bank’s donations? To those helping kids with learning disabilities whose parents are busy worrying about the choice between heating and eating?
- What would the implications be on refugee support services overwhelmed with immigrants fleeing to safer ground and trying to raise funds in a society with reducing tolerance for more people on ‘our’ soil?

If your organisation hasn’t engaged with climate change as an explicit part of your strategic thinking, the table below gives a simple framework to structure your analysis and give focus to your conversations with the leadership team, staff and Board.

(I’m also running a free Q&A session, see end of article for details)

¹ This article is aimed at UK-based organisations as INGOs have been all too aware for some time. In case you need it, a reminder of the basic facts here: [Climate Reality Check 2020](#)

² https://www.un.org/esa/desa/papers/2017/wp152_2017.pdf

Five-Step Framework for integrating climate change impact into your organisational strategy

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| <p>STEP 1 Climate change impact - research what the environmental impact of climate change could look like in your area of operation</p> | <p>Helpful links</p> <p>Climate Justice Tool - aimed at public service providers: https://www.climatejust.org.uk</p> <p>Weather projections - Met Office & BBC tool - What will climate change look like in my area?</p> |
| <p>STEP 2 Users / beneficiaries - consider the potential impact on the lives of your users / beneficiaries.</p> <p>‘Hard empathy’ is what we have to conjure up when we don’t have any personal experience with what someone else is going through.</p> <p>Try reading through a few of your organisation’s case studies... Think about what the environmental impacts listed above could mean in your life... Then employ ‘hard empathy’ to further imagine the changes in the lives of your users</p> | <p>Categories to consider</p> <p>Physical environment eg Shelter, air quality, green spaces, fuel poverty, flood risk</p> <p>Livelihoods/economic situation eg Transport, income, job prospects</p> <p>Physical and mental health eg winter mortality, access to healthcare and medicines, outlook, resilience</p> <p>Basic needs eg food security</p> |
| <p>STEP 3 Key Stakeholders - How might the funding/donor landscape change?</p> | <p>Key Questions</p> <p>Where will institutional donors put their attention?</p> <p>How might anxiety and economic consequences affect the public willingness and ability to donate?</p> |
| <p>STEP 4 Organisational - Consider the direct effects of climate change on organisational capacity</p> | <p>Categories to consider</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - People, working location, wellbeing - Regulatory changes eg net zero requirements - Premises e.g. intolerable overheating - Transport, infrastructure, supply chain - Budgets, both higher & unexpected costs - Technology infrastructure required for service provision and internal comms |
| <p>STEP 5 Strategy - as you look forward over the next 3/5/10 years, how does the changing context and changing needs of your users / beneficiaries inform your strategic priorities?</p> <p>Structure a discussion around the questions on the right.</p> <p>Update SWOT analysis and use findings to inform organisational strategy.</p> | <p>Key Questions</p> <p>What are the opportunities and threats for your organization?</p> <p>What gaps are there in your current plan/model?</p> <p>What new approaches, partnerships, technologies could enable you to better respond?</p> |

Some considerations

1. This stuff is hard. Emotionally, intellectually. You may need the space for personal reflection first, to get clear and grounded in your approach. It's okay if it takes time for you to be ready, it shows that you both understand what's happening and see your opportunity to lead.
2. Discuss with your SLT, mentors or peers - your most trusted cohort. Think about how to integrate this into strategic conversations. There's no one Right Way. How much detail would be helpful to look at with SLT, with the Board, with the wider team? You want the conversations that are as brief and insightful as possible, in order to move efficiently through the challenging analysis (particularly step 2) to positive planning.
3. Be awake to feedback from/about team members who find this discussion overwhelming or who struggle to engage with it. Demonstrate support and empathy, emphasising the proactive approach they are taking in enabling a positive effective response. If necessary, refer them to resources that may help eg <https://www.climatepsychologists.com/resources>

The upside of this process

Facing these issues head-on will enable you to build organisational resilience and demonstrate greater agility and responsiveness when required. Increasingly, donors will reward those who have demonstrated foresight and appropriate planning.

This is not a situation where there is a clear right answer. 'Success' is thoughtful leadership, consciously using the anticipated climate challenges ahead as a driver to build the organisational skills needed to navigate uncertainty.

By taking a clear-eyed look at the possible future, you will be able to say that you have built greater

- Clarity - of your organisation's role in the future, which enables a clearer context for decision making
- Capacity - in your organisation's quality of strategic thinking and agility to respond to change
- Confidence - that your team can navigate a world of complexity and uncertainty

In other words, a stronger organisation.

Additional support: free one-hour Q&A

As this is a difficult, important and urgent topic I'm also running a free one-hour Q&A to facilitate peer support and share further tips and tools on how to implement the framework and engage your team and Board in this discussion.

Do join us, the more people supporting each other in this conversation, the better.

It's at **12 Noon, 26th November**, please sign up below to attend or receive the recording.

REGISTER FOR FREE Q&A:

https://uso2web.zoom.us/meeting/register/tZUrc-CorzotE9DuaybBAaWNdCLvHqXG_oPz