



**UNHCR**  
The UN Refugee Agency



# Strategic Framework for Climate Action

## Climate change is a risk multiplier, driving displacement and protection needs around the world.

# Introduction

This document sets out the parameters for UNHCR's response to the growing, global climate emergency. It provides a common framework and approach to step up our ambition under three core pillars for action – law and policy, operations, and “greening” UNHCR. The Framework will be implemented primarily through the development of plans of action driven at regional and country levels in collaboration with affected communities, host governments, UN Country Teams and a wide range of partners. These include NGOs, international organizations, international and regional financial institutions, the private sector and academia.

The document is aligned with the High Commissioner's Strategic Directions 2017-2021<sup>1</sup> and complements relevant UNHCR policy, strategy and guidance. It is guided by the Common Core Principles for a UN System-wide Approach to Climate Action,<sup>2</sup> and supports the Secretary General's Climate Action Strategy 2020-2021 and the UN Plan of Action on Disaster Risk Reduction for Resilience.<sup>3</sup> It supports international commitments related to climate change, disasters and environmental degradation under the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR), the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM) and the Agenda for the Protection of Cross-Border Displaced Persons in the context of disasters and climate change.<sup>4</sup> In doing so, it contributes to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development<sup>5</sup>, the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the Paris Agreement and the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030 at global, regional, national and local levels.

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1 UNHCR's [Strategic Directions 2017-2021](#)

2 The [Common Core Principles for a UN System-Wide Approach to Climate Change Action](#).

3 [United Nations Plan of Action on Disaster Risk Reduction for Resilience \(2017\)](#).

4 [Agenda for the Protection of Cross-Border Displaced Persons in the Context of Disasters and Climate Change \(2015\). Developed through the State-led Nansen Initiative and endorsed by 109 States.](#)

5 Including Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 13 on Climate Action, while other SDGs are also relevant.

		Approach			
		Collaborative	Evidence-based	Innovative	Inclusive
Three Pillars for Action	 <p><b>1. Law &amp; Policy</b></p>	<p><b>Objective 1:</b> Guide the interpretation and application of relevant legal and policy frameworks, develop guidance and catalyze international discussions</p>			
	 <p><b>2. Operations</b></p>	<p><b>Objective 2.1:</b> Preserve and rehabilitate the natural environment and mitigate environmental degradation in displacement settings</p> <p><b>Objective 2.2:</b> Enhance the resilience of displaced people and host communities to climate-related and other environmental risks</p> <p><b>Objective 2.3:</b> Strengthen preparedness, anticipatory action and response to support protection and solutions for people displaced and their hosts in disaster situations</p>			
	 <p><b>3. UNHCR's Environmental Footprint</b></p>	<p><b>Objective 3:</b> Improve UNHCR's environmental sustainability by reducing greenhouse gas emissions and minimizing negative impacts on the environment</p>			



**CHAD.** *Djabal camp. Darfur, Sudan.*  
© UNHCR/Hélène Caux



**CHAD.** *The rainy season of 2020 has caused flooding in several localities in Chad including Ndjamena, the capital.*  
© UNHCR/Aristophane Ngargoune

## Rationale

Climate change is the defining crisis of our time and its impacts are disproportionately experienced by people in vulnerable situations. Displaced and stateless persons, including women, children, older persons, people with disabilities, LGBTQI+ people<sup>6</sup> and indigenous peoples, are among those in greatest need of protection.<sup>7</sup> As UN Secretary-General António Guterres said, “*The time for small steps has passed. What is needed now is transformational change*”. In this spirit, UNHCR is stepping up its commitment and ambition to meet the humanitarian and protection challenges already being amplified by the climate emergency, and to mitigate and prepare for those to come.

Global plans to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, the main driver of rapidly rising average temperatures, are wholly inadequate if warming is to be limited to the internationally agreed target ceiling of 1.5C - or at least 2C - by the end of the century. We have already exceeded 1.1C and are on a path to 3C if mitigation efforts are not rapidly and sustainably increased. Climate change can clearly be seen in the increasing intensity and frequency of extreme weather events, such as abnormally heavy rainfall, prolonged drought, heatwaves and cyclones. Such hazards are already inducing some 23 million displacements of people from their homes each year, as an average based on data from the past decade. Most are internally displaced within their home countries, while some may also be impelled to cross borders in search of safety and protection.

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<sup>6</sup> Refers to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex and other gender identities and sexual orientations (LGBTQI+)

<sup>7</sup> UNHCR and International Indigenous Peoples' Forum on Climate Change joint Factsheet (2020) [Indigenous Peoples' Knowledge and Climate Adaptation](#)

Gradual environmental degradation linked to the changing climate, such as desertification, is also creating conditions that may lead to displacement from barren and uninhabitable land. Sea-level rise is increasing coastal flooding, erosion, soil salinization and the threat of permanent inundation in low-lying areas. Communities are facing wide-ranging impacts on their health and livelihoods through the loss of food, water, land and other natural resources essential for survival and wellbeing. Resilience to climate-related disasters, environmental degradation and displacement is often lowest in fragile and conflict-affected contexts. Seven of the ten countries most vulnerable to, and least prepared for climate change impacts host a peacekeeping operation or a special political mission.<sup>8</sup> Sudden- and slow-onset disasters may exacerbate conflict dynamics and increase the impact of other drivers of conflict and fragility.<sup>9</sup> The eight worst food crises in 2019, all in countries where UNHCR operates, were linked to both climate change impacts and conflict.<sup>10</sup> Additional crises, as the COVID-19 pandemic has shown, will add to this complexity. Climate-related risks may also hinder safe, dignified and durable solutions to displacement, including return. Without ambitious climate action and disaster risk reduction, climate-related disasters could double the number of people requiring humanitarian assistance to over 200 million each year by 2050.<sup>11</sup>

Preparing for and addressing these challenges require an urgent collaborative effort, informed and enabled by the latest science and technology. While prioritizing collaboration with displaced and stateless people, host governments and communities, UNHCR will work with UN Member States; international organizations within and outside the UN system; other humanitarian and development actors; international and regional financial institutions; regional organizations; local authorities; civil society, including faith-based organizations; academics and other experts; the private sector; and the media. Without collective ambition to mitigate and adapt to climate change, progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is being put in jeopardy.

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8 UN News July 2020, [Climate emergency 'a danger to peace', UN Security Council hears](#)

9 UNHCR, [In Harm's Way: International Protection in the Context of Nexus Dynamics Between Conflict or Violence and Disaster or Climate Change, 2018](#)

10 OCHA (2020). [Global Humanitarian Overview 2020](#).

11 International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), ["The Cost of Doing Nothing: The Humanitarian Price of Climate Change and How It Can Be Avoided"](#) (Geneva, 2019).

**SOMALIA.** *Families affected by drought*  
© UNHCR/Mustafa Saeed





## COVID-19 and Climate Change

The UN Secretary-General's 2020-2021 Strategy on Climate Action recognizes that climate action needs to be integral to recovery from the COVID-19 crisis.<sup>12</sup> Determination and unity is needed to deliver in difficult conditions, including through boosting support to developing countries with already limited capacity. It is critical that government's mid- and longer-term plans prioritize green and risk-informed recovery. Such plans must also consider the situation of refugees and displaced people.<sup>13</sup>



**HONDURAS.** *UNHCR and partners support communities affected by tropical storms.*  
© UNHCR/Rafael Mattar

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<sup>12</sup> See UN Secretary General's [Six Climate Positive Actions to help rebuild economies from COVID-19 Pandemic](#)

<sup>13</sup> UNHCR and Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research (2020). [Covid-19, Displacement and Climate Change](#)

# Our Role

As a global organization dedicated to saving lives, protecting rights and building a better future for displaced and stateless persons and host communities, UNHCR has an important contribution to make to global climate action. This contribution is based on our protection mandate and expertise, our operational field presence and proximity to displaced populations, our designated role in the Humanitarian Cluster Approach, our experience working in complex contexts and our extensive network of partners.

UNHCR is a thought leader able to mobilize networks of international and local partners and guide protection-centred solutions. We provide data, analysis and legal and technical support and guidance to Member States to inform climate action and disaster risk reduction across humanitarian, development and peacebuilding objectives that prioritize some of the most vulnerable countries, communities and people. As a member of the UNFCCC Task Force on Displacement, and as a standing invitee to the Steering Group of the State-led Platform on Disaster Displacement (PDD), UNHCR engages with governments and works closely with IOM and other organizations, as well as with civil society and academic partners. UNHCR also engages with the UN Security Council's Climate and Security Mechanism on climate-related security risks and with human rights mechanisms.

Across all pillars of action, the organization adopts a rights- and evidence-based approach towards issues of displacement and statelessness. In collaboration with a growing range of humanitarian and development allies, we act as a catalyst for protection and sustainable solutions in the context of climate change. We advocate for displaced and stateless people to represent themselves in policy forums and to participate in the decisions affecting their resilience to climate and environmental risk.



**BANGLADESH.** Kutupalong refugee camp expanded and made safer by UNHCR and partners

© UNHCR/Roger Arnold

# Three Pillars for Action

## 1. Law and Policy

### Objective 1:

**Guide the interpretation and application of relevant legal and policy frameworks, develop guidance and catalyse international discussions**

Most people who are displaced by disasters and the adverse effects of climate change become displaced within their own countries. Over time, UNHCR has played an important role in supporting international, regional, national and sub-national development of laws and policies relevant to internally displaced persons (IDPs). Such efforts have been referenced by the Special Representative with regard to the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement in 1998.

For those who are driven to cross an international border, the global legal framework for international refugee protection may be applicable and may serve to effectively extend international protection. In particular, where the effects of climate change and disaster interact with violence, conflict or persecution leading to displacement, individuals may be refugees under the 1951 Refugee Convention. In addition, the OAU Convention and Cartagena Declaration include broader refugee criteria that recognize, as refugees, those persons who, owing to “events seriously disturbing public order” are compelled to leave their country. This may occur as a result of the adverse effects of climate change and disasters where the impact is sufficiently severe and where the State is unable or unwilling to protect against it. In regions where the OAU Convention and the Cartagena Declaration do not apply, those facing a real risk of serious harm because of the adverse effects of climate change or disasters, and who cannot benefit from State protection, may still be protected from enforced return and benefit from international protection where the gravity of the risks would trigger the non-refoulement obligation under international customary law and international human rights instruments.<sup>14</sup>

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