


Fridtjof Nansen during
his legendary Arctic
expedition from 1893
through 1896.

Nansen

*The man,
the inspiration,
the legacy*



“The difficult is what takes a little time. The impossible is what takes a little longer.”

– Fridtjof Nansen

Fridtjof Nansen, born in Norway in 1861, remains an inspiration for UNHCR and the humanitarian world today. His determination to make the impossible possible is evident in his notable accomplishments in diverse fields. Nansen the adventurer reached the most northerly latitude in nearly 400 years of Arctic exploration. Nansen the diplomat negotiated the lifting of the Allied blockade that allowed shipments of essential food during World War I.

And Nansen the humanitarian, appointed by the League of Nations as the first High Commissioner for Refugees in 1921, immediately began the formidable task of facilitating the repatriation of hundreds of thousands of people displaced by conflict and assisting them to acquire legal status.

For his life-saving achievements, Nansen was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1922. ●●●

Nansen the man

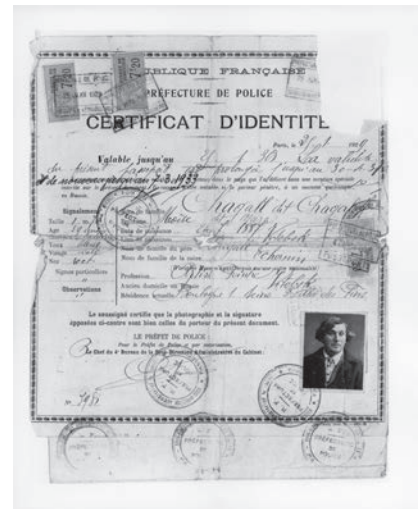
Fridtjof Nansen excelled as a scientist, polar explorer, diplomat and humanitarian.

By the age of 27, he had completed a doctoral thesis on the human central nervous system and was the first to cross Greenland's treacherous ice cap. Soon after this, Nansen led a 25-month expedition into the Arctic Circle, coming nearer to the North Pole than anyone before.

Yet, in spite of his many notable personal accomplishments, Nansen is best known for his visionary work for the refugee cause. In an effort to help rebuild Europe after World War I, he carried out the League of Nations' first major humanitarian response – the repatriation of 450,000 prisoners of war. His intellect, valour and charisma proved instrumental in winning the support of governments and voluntary agencies alike. Today, his courage and compassion serve as an inspiration.

Nansen's extraordinary efforts as the High Commissioner for Refugees from 1921-1930 assisted many displaced people to resume normal life, including by becoming legal residents and finding work in their countries of refuge. When famine broke out in Russia in 1921, Nansen organized a relief programme for millions of starving people.

In the wake of war, hundreds of thousands of uprooted people were left with no documentation, often stripped of their nationality and unable to enjoy their rights in their country of asylum. Nansen was instrumental in designing the internationally recognized Nansen Passport that allowed people forced to flee to legally cross borders and gain access to basic services. The travel document became recognized by more than 50 governments and over 450,000 were issued, allowing individuals and families to rebuild their lives.



The identity document of stateless Marc Chagall, issued by the French authorities.

UNHCR/1929

Fridtjof Nansen tastes the food at a summer camp for Armenian orphan boys outside Alexandropol, Armenia.



UNHCR/1925

Nansen the inspiration

Nansen's vision and tenacity are needed just as much today as the world tackles another daunting task: finding solutions for people uprooted from their homes by disasters or climate change.

Every year people are displaced by floods, cyclones, droughts, as well as other slow and sudden-onset meteorological events around the world. With the growing frequency and intensity of disasters associated with climate change and environmental degradation, the numbers of people forced to move in this context are anticipated to rise.

While no single international organization is mandated to deal with populations who are displaced by disasters or climate change, UNHCR is particularly concerned with protecting and preserving the human rights of people forced to relocate within their own country or to seek refuge across international borders. However, when people cross borders in the context of a disaster or climate change-related events, responses are insufficient and protection is inadequate.

The 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees notes that owing to "a well-founded fear of persecution" on the grounds of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, a person may seek and be granted protection. Natural disasters or climate change, however, are not included among these grounds for protection.



A community in Dacope, Bangladesh, affected by Cyclone Aila in 2009 is still living on low-lying embankments – vulnerable to hazards including cyclones and tidal surges.

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Just as Nansen witnessed the suffering of uprooted people in the aftermath of the First World War and devised a solution, several States are now pursuing a new vision to address the issue of climate change and seek solutions.

Based on the outcome of the Nansen Conference on Climate Change and Displacement in Oslo in June 2011, later that year Norway and Switzerland pledged to address the needs of people displaced across international borders by natural hazards and the effects of climate change. This helped launch the Nansen Initiative, a multi-stakeholder consultative process.

The Initiative does not seek to develop new legal standards but rather to help build a sound

knowledge base and compile good practice examples. Intergovernmental regional consultations have already taken place in the Pacific (Cook Islands), Central America (Costa Rica), the Horn of Africa (Kenya) and South-East Asia (The Philippines), and another edition will be held in South Asia (Bangladesh) in April 2015. Plans are underway to discuss the results of regional consultations at an intergovernmental consultation in October 2015.

UNHCR is a standing invitee of the Nansen Initiative Steering Group and has been able to inform and support the process as a member of the consultative committee, a role that is shared with the Norwegian Refugee Council's Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre.

Nansen the legacy

Nansen's legacy of courage and compassion remains evident today, some 85 years after his death.

In 1954, UNHCR established the Nansen Refugee Award in his honour. It has since recognized the contributions of those who dedicate their lives to protecting and assisting refugees, asylum-seekers, internally displaced and stateless people. The Award is supported by the Swiss and Norwegian Governments, the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) and the IKEA Foundation, and boasts a long list of distinguished laureates. They include Eleanor Roosevelt, Graça Machel, Médecins sans Frontières, and other lesser-known heroes who assist and advocate for refugees. Laureates are from diverse backgrounds but share a common quality: an outstanding commitment and selfless dedication to the refugee cause.

On the occasion of its 60th anniversary, the annual Nansen Refugee Award ceremony honoured the 2014 laureates *Butterflies with*

New Wings Building a Future (Butterflies), a women's rights network from Buenaventura, Colombia. The network was selected for the Award for the exceptional courage and tireless efforts of the volunteers who reach out to displaced women in danger, particularly those who have suffered sexual and gender-based violence in conflict. The members of the *Butterflies* network often put themselves at risk to fulfil their mission to help protect displaced women and girls.

Hosted by Isabelle Kumar, the Nansen Refugee Award ceremony, which took place in Geneva in early October 2014, welcomed more than 850 guests. Singer-songwriters Maher Zain and Rokia Traoré as well as acoustic guitar duo *Rodrigo y Gabriela* performed, with UNHCR's Special Envoy Angelina Jolie Pitt delivering the keynote address via video recording. An added highlight was the debut of a song that was penned by Maher Zain in honour of refugees. ■

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The work of this network has helped more than a thousand women, teenagers and girls. Within the context of the violence, known by everybody, our biggest strength is to stand against it, especially violence against women, mainly sexual violence.

– Gloria Amparo on behalf of *Butterflies* at the 2014 Nansen Refugee Award ceremony.

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The 2014 Nansen Refugee Award ceremony

