



**UNHCR**  
The UN Refugee Agency



**SUMMARY**

## **HIGH COMMISSIONER'S DIALOGUE ON PROTECTION CHALLENGES: PROTECTION AND RESILIENCE DURING PANDEMICS**

*COVID-19 and Climate Change – What can we learn?*

# COVID-19 and Climate Change – What can we learn?

## SESSION DESCRIPTION

The fourth session of the High Commissioner's Dialogue, "COVID-19 and Climate Change – What can we learn?" was dedicated to taking the lessons learned from the COVID-19 response and applying them to the climate emergency.

Climate, environmental degradation, and natural hazards increasingly interact with the drivers of displacement. One-third of refugees are hosted in the least developed countries, which are often the most climate vulnerable. Despite their unique vulnerability, refugees, internally displaced persons (IDPs), and host communities have historically been severely underserved by climate adaptation support and excluded from disaster risk reduction strategies and measures. At the same time, climate change impacts, in combination with other factors, are a growing driver of new displacement and are increasing protection concerns for those already displaced.

### **COVID-19 has brought our relationship with the environment into sharp focus.**

The current pandemic has tested the world's ability to respond to a health crisis of global magnitude and is perhaps our most illuminating view of how serious the consequences of climate change could be. Many parallels have been drawn between COVID-19 and the climate emergency. Both crises cause disruption on a global scale and call for heavy reliance on science to inform policy responses. Certain groups are disproportionately affected by the spread of COVID-19. They are often the same groups that carry the brunt of the burden from climate change, while having contributed little to the emergence of the problem. This includes displaced and stateless persons and those already marginalized by structural barriers. This session of the dialogue considered lessons learned from the COVID-19 situation that could help address the ever-growing climate emergency and the existential threats it poses to the international community.

The focus was on the first-hand experience of people affected by climate change as well as on the related displacement and protection concerns. In 2019, nearly 2,000 disasters, mostly related to weather hazards, triggered some 25 million new displacements within 140 countries and territories. The COVID-19 crisis highlights the imperative to listen to science, learn from affected communities and act with urgency to anticipate, mitigate, and adapt to the inevitable impacts of climate change.

For both crises, early mitigative action and preparedness is crucial to prevent loss of life and leave ample space open for adaptation and increasing disaster response capacities. Overall, while both crises unfold, it is clear that the adverse effects of climate change and COVID-19 cause human and economic losses and that many people are increasingly vulnerable to future shocks. The COVID-19 crisis highlights the imperative to listen, learn, act with urgency, and do-no-harm.

Following opening remarks by the Assistant High Commissioner for Protection, representatives from affected communities shared their experiences and recommendations for dealing with the climate emergency, while researchers and practitioners from the climate community provided an outlook of policy developments that are necessary to accelerate climate action. A Q&A allowed participants to ask questions to speakers and UNHCR representatives as well as for participants to reflect upon how COVID-19 can inform our response and preparedness to climate change and how humanitarian action needs to adapt to handle complex situations with multiple, evolving crises more efficiently.

## Chair



### **Ms. Gillian Triggs**

*Assistant High Commissioner for Protection, Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)*

Ms. Gillian Triggs is UNHCR's Assistant High Commissioner for Protection. She was appointed on 9 August 2019. She is a highly renowned expert in international law who has held a number of eminent appointments in service to human rights and the refugee cause, including most recently as the President of the Australian Human Rights Commission and the Vice Chancellor's Fellow and Emeritus Professor at the University of Melbourne. Ms. Triggs oversees UNHCR's protection work for millions of refugees and internally displaced, stateless, and other people of concern. An Australian national, she has previously held a number of leadership roles, including as President of the Asian Development Bank Administrative Tribunal, Chair of the UN Independent Expert Panel of Inquiry into Abuse of Office and Harassment in UNAIDS, Dean of the Faculty of Law and Challis Professor of International Law at the University of Sydney, and as Director of the British Institute of International and Comparative Law in London. Ms. Triggs has been closely associated with a number of not-for-profit organizations throughout her career, including most recently as Chair of Justice Connect, an organization that connects 10,000 lawyers to provide pro bono advice to asylum-seekers and others in need of legal support in Australia. She is also the author of many books and papers on public international law.



## Moderator



### **Ms. Elizabeth Puranam**

*Al Jazeera presenter and correspondent | Delhi, India*

Ms. Elizabeth Puranam is an international broadcast journalist. She is currently based in Delhi as *Al Jazeera's* India Correspondent. She previously spent seven years at the channel's headquarters in Qatar as a senior news and current affairs presenter. She grew up in India and New Zealand and is passionate about covering issues of social justice and human rights.

## Speakers



### **H.E. Ambassador Ms. Nazhat Shameem Khan**

*Permanent Representative of the Republic of Fiji to the United Nations in Geneva | Switzerland*

H.E. Ambassador Ms. Nazhat Shameem Khan is the Permanent Representative of Fiji to the UN in Geneva. She is a former public prosecutor and was the first woman to be appointed a High Court judge in Fiji. In 2017, she was appointed the Chief Negotiator of the UNFCCC COP under Fiji's Presidency. In 2019, she was a Vice President of the Human Rights Council.

- Twitter: [@nazhatskhan](https://twitter.com/nazhatskhan) and [@FijiGeneva](https://twitter.com/FijiGeneva)



### **Ms. Hindou Oumarou Ibrahim**

*SDG advocate for Climate Action and indigenous people's rights | Chad*

Ms. Hindou Oumarou Ibrahim is an environmental activist, member of Chad's pastoralist Mbororo community, a UN Sustainable Development Goals Advocate, President of the Association for Indigenous Women and Peoples of Chad (AFPAT), and member of the Indigenous Peoples of Africa Coordinating Committee (IPACC). She began advocating for indigenous rights and environmental protection at age 16. She served as co-chair of the International Indigenous Peoples Forum on Climate Change (IIPFCC) during the historic UN Climate Change Conference (COP21) in Paris. Her vision is to

promote traditional knowledge and science to improve resilience to climate change, especially for rural communities.

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**Mr. Bidal Abraham**  
*South Sudanese Refugee Activist | Uganda*

Bidal Abraham is a 33-year-old refugee from South Sudan, a trained teacher, and a passionate advocate for the environment. He is the current chairperson of the Refugee Welfare Council in Omugo Village 05, Rhinocamp settlement. Bidal has mobilized refugees and others in his village to grow trees and protect the environment. He supports partners in constructing energy-saving stoves to reduce deforestation and fight against climate change.

- [Refugee from South Sudan becomes an advocate for tree planting in Uganda](#)



**Prof. Saleemul Huq**  
*Director of the International Centre for Climate Change and Development and Senior fellow at the International Institute for Environment & Development | Bangladesh*

Professor Saleemul Huq is the Director of the International Centre for Climate Change and Development (ICCCAD) at the Independent University, Bangladesh and Senior Fellow at the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) in London. His special focus is on interlinkages between climate change (both mitigation and adaptation) and sustainable development from the perspective of developing countries. He contributed as a lead author to the third and fourth assessment reports of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC).

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**Ms. Aditi Maheshwari**  
*Director for Climate Action in the UN Secretary General's Executive Office | New York, United States*

Ms. Aditi Maheshwari has been addressing climate change from both public and private sector perspectives

for over 18 years. She is the Director for Climate Action in the UN Secretary-General's Executive Office. Her role is to lead stakeholder engagement to advance climate action and deliver on coalitions and initiatives launched at the [Climate Action Summit in 2019](#), prioritizing energy and industry transition, cities, climate finance, resilience, and nature-based solutions. Prior to her current appointment, she was a Senior Operations Officer at IFC, mobilizing private capital for climate investments in developing countries. She led initiatives to promote private sector investment aligned with national climate plans and supported businesses to manage carbon risks and capitalize on opportunities.

Publication credits: co-authoring IFC's [Green Buildings: A Finance and Policy Blueprint for Emerging Markets](#) and leading IFC's flagship report on [Climate Investment Opportunities in Cities](#).

Ms. Maheshwari has held other climate and clean energy-related roles at the World Bank, DFID, and the South African National Treasury while on an ODI Fellowship. She holds an MSc in Environmental and Resource Economics from the University College London.



**Mr. Andrew Harper**

*Special Advisor on Climate Action, Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)*

Mr. Andrew Harper is the Special Advisor on Climate Action to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Geneva. He is responsible for providing strategic guidance, oversight, and expertise to shape UNHCR's climate action agenda. Prior to his current tasks, he was the Director of the Division of Programme Support and Management (DPSM), where he oversaw programme policy, planning, and management, as well as technical support to field operations.

Mr. Harper has led the Innovation Service in UNHCR and was responsible for leading and coordinating the international response to the Syria refugee crisis in Jordan. Some of the main achievements included responding to, at the time, the largest refugee crisis in the world, the establishment of the Zaatari and Azraq refugee camps, introducing biometric registration, and linking that to the world's largest biometric-based refugee cash assistance programme. Mr. Harper also served as the Head of Desk for UNHCR, covering the Iraq Situation, and as the Emergency Focal Point for the Middle East and North Africa region for the Libyan Crisis. He has previously worked notably for the Australian Embassy in Turkey and UNOCHA, and in various field locations with UNHCR, including Central and Southeast Asia, the Western Balkans, Islamic Republic of Iran, and Ukraine.

**SUMMARY OF DISCUSSION**

This session was attended by nearly 650 participants from 83 countries.

**Key issues**

Many similarities can be drawn between the climate emergency and the COVID-19 pandemic. Their impacts transcend borders and are of global magnitude. Both threaten millions of lives and

cause economic disruption. Both are dependent on science to inform decision making and are risk multipliers that exacerbate inequalities. The COVID-19 pandemic can be seen as a test case for the world's emergency preparedness, particularly for protecting the most vulnerable populations such as refugees, internally displaced persons, and stateless persons.

COVID-19 and climate change both disproportionately affect the most vulnerable. People who have been forcibly displaced, particularly women, children, older people, people with disabilities, and indigenous people, are especially at risk and face limited access to justice and institutions. To support the most vulnerable effectively, their voices must be heard in decision making. We must ensure true inclusion of these groups in decision making.

In a world where every year going forward is even warmer than previous ones, climate change causes more frequent, unpredictable, and intense weather-related disasters. In 2019, nearly 2,000 disasters triggered 25 million new displacements in 140 countries. The World Health Organization estimates that between 2030 and 2050, climate change will cause 250,000 additional deaths every year due to malnutrition, malaria, and heat stress.

The impacts of climate change contribute to the loss of livelihoods and place stress on community cohesion, as the scarcity of resources may create or exacerbate conflicts between displaced and host communities.

Progress towards strengthening resilience and adaptation is lagging behind that of mitigation. Finance for adaptation marks only 20 per cent of the overall share of climate finance. Adaptation finance must be scaled up to 50 per cent, while also ensuring that climate finance is targeting the most vulnerable. It is important that the level of climate finance is maintained despite COVID-19 and that developed countries are delivering on their USD 100 billion climate finance commitment.

Multilateral and multisectoral cooperation across all levels of decision making is essential. The private sector must be included to raise climate ambition, mainstream climate action, and create a more sustainable finance system.

#### Good practices

**Mr. Bidal Abraham**, a South Sudanese refugee activist, created a tree-planting initiative in his community in Uganda. This counteracts deforestation, mitigates climate change, reduces tension between refugees and the host community, and offers a variety of benefits to the refugees themselves.

**Professor Saleemul Huq**, Director of the International Centre for Climate Change and Development (ICCCAD) at the Independent University, Bangladesh and Senior Fellow at the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED), described how in Bangladesh, efforts are underway to develop climate resilient, migrant friendly towns.

**H.E. Ambassador Ms. Nazhat Shameem Khan**, Government of Fiji, provided examples of how Fiji transitioned from using more traditional and reactive disaster response to building resilient systems that are prepared for future challenges. Fiji also uses a participatory and inclusive approach, including affected communities in the planning of disaster responses and in developing

resilient solutions. The Ambassador emphasized that the voices of women and members of the LGBTQIA+ community who might be prone to gender-based violence should be particularly considered in the inclusive disaster responses. This is an empowering process in itself.

**Ms. Hindou Ibrahim**, *an advocate for climate action and indigenous people's rights*, discussed how the inclusion of indigenous knowledge offers additional evidence to strengthen adaptation to climate change.

**Ms. Aditi Maheshwari**, *Director for Climate Action in the United Nations Secretary-General's Executive Office*, outlined the UN Secretary-General's six climate positive actions for a sustainable and long-term recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic: (1) investments in green jobs and businesses, (2) ending bailouts for polluting industries, (3) ending subsidies for fossil fuels, (4) mainstreaming climate change considerations in all decision-making, (5) strengthening collaboration, and (6) ensuring that no one is left behind. Even though an increasing number of countries pledge to become climate neutral by 2050, words must be turned into action and the pace of progress enhanced.

**Mr. Andrew Harper**, *Special Advisor on Climate Action*, was appointed by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees to shape UNHCR's climate change agenda and to advocate for protection of displaced populations who are among those in greatest need. The Special Advisor has guided the development of a strategic framework for climate action that targets legal and policy guidance, the operational response, and UNHCR's own environmental footprint. UNHCR has further produced a paper on legal considerations regarding claims for international protection in the context of climate change and disasters.

## Recommendations

### 1. Inclusion

Participants emphasized the need to enable transformative change which places affected populations at the centre. The voices of women, as well as vulnerable and marginalized groups, must be heard, and we cannot leave anyone behind.

### 2. Urgency

The world must learn from the COVID-19 pandemic and act with urgency to prepare and respond to the climate emergency. Existing measures must be scaled up and ambitions enhanced to allow for a sustainable recovery from the pandemic and an adequate response to the climate emergency.

### 3. Resilience

Climate action must give sufficient attention to both mitigation and systemic adaptation. To create truly resilient systems there must be strong community engagement in the planning processes, with a specific focus on the most vulnerable.



#### 4. Anticipatory action

Participants acknowledged the need to invest in anticipatory action in order to mitigate, and where possible, prevent displacement before it occurs. Reactive action is not sufficient, and we must be better prepared to provide protection in the future.

#### 5. Evidence-based decision-making

Participants highlighted the need for evidence-based decision-making that builds on both science and traditional knowledge.

#### 6. Indigenous knowledge

Indigenous people safeguard 80 per cent of the world's biodiversity. The inclusion of indigenous knowledge in climate action and adaptation strategies is essential. Simultaneously, the rights of indigenous communities must be protected, and the ownership of their land recognised.

#### 7. Empowerment

Through the provision of training and education, affected communities can be supported to protect, preserve, and rehabilitate their environment. In particular, the potential for women to be leaders in climate action calls for a gender-transformative approach.

#### 8. Collaboration

Collaborative efforts and multilateralism are essential. Participants recognized the necessity of acting globally as only joint responses are truly effective.

#### 9. Protecting the environment, protecting people

Refugees are often located in the most fragile places where they are particularly exposed to the impacts of climate change. The protection of the environment allows for the protection of the most vulnerable communities and supports peaceful co-existence between refugees and their host communities.

Throughout the series of dialogues, participants made the following further recommendations related to participation of refugees, internally displaced persons, and stateless persons in supporting the response through the online Q&A as well as in written statements:

- Support UNHCR's role in helping to support or expand protection, assistance, and solutions to those displaced by climate change and disaster.
- Take measures to reduce the effects of climate change.
- Ensure additional funds to tackle the issue.
- States and other stakeholders, such as the business sector, should contribute to mitigating the risks for people of concern and for the planet.
- Support national efforts to build resilient infrastructures and systems, business environments, and communities.

- Address how climate related disasters are interlinked with an increase in human rights abuses against women, girls, and vulnerable people, especially the LGBTIQ+ community, as they are at higher risk of gender-based violence.
- UNHCR should work further on effective and transformative gender programmes and women-led responses that are effectively addressing the major structural barriers to women's inclusion and rights in the context of climate related disasters and displacement.
- Address the threat posed by climate change to children's ability to survive, grow, and thrive and protect and support children and their families living through conflict, disaster, and displacement.
- Ensure that the response to the pandemic does not come at the expense of supporting the response to climate change and disasters.
- Partner with government officials, legal practitioners, and civil society to advance case law relevant to UNHCR's recent "Legal considerations regarding claims for international protection made in the context of the adverse effects of climate change and disaster".
- Increase engagement with civil society to reduce displacement risks and harms and address the need for context-specific solutions.
- Work towards prevention, where possible, of climate and environment induced displacement as key to addressing the root causes of forced displacement.