

Background Note

Session on Climate Action in Sub-Saharan Africa

UNHCR's Climate Action Framework and NGO initiatives to address climate-related changes in the context of forced displacement

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“If we fail to meet the challenge, all our other challenges will just become greater and threaten to swallow us. Climate change is, quite simply, an existential threat for most life on the planet – including, and especially, the life of humankind. That is why we must use all our resources to build a sense of urgency.”¹ - António Guterres, UN Secretary-General

Africa is considered “one of the most vulnerable continents to climate change and climate variability, a situation aggravated by the interaction of ‘multiple stresses’, occurring at various levels, and low adaptive capacity.” (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change - IPCC 2017). The IPCC further warns that if urgent action is not taken, the Sahel region could be disproportionately affected² with a foreseeable scenario of a 3-degree rise in temperature representing double the global average increase expected by 2050.³ Greater droughts, more heat waves and massive crop failures are therefore to be expected. According to the IPCC, projections show that the western Sahel region will experience the strongest drying, with a significant increase in the maximum length of dry spells. Perhaps no region in the world is affected as much as the Sahel, where 3.5 million people are forcibly displaced. The IPCC also considers West Africa to generally be a climate-change hotspot. Signs of this bleak outlook are already apparent with an increase in the frequency and intensity of floods, droughts, and other climate-related hazards.

The East/Horn of Africa and the Great Lakes, in particular countries belonging to IGAD⁴, are considered among the most vulnerable regions to climate variability and change globally. More than two thirds of the area is arid or semi-arid and the region regularly faces a wide range of natural hazards, such as severe droughts and floods, but also landslides, earthquakes and tropical cyclones, as well as slow-onset climate change effects, such as sea level rise, environmental degradation, and changing rainfall

¹ António Guterres, UN Secretary-General, Remarks at Austrian World Summit in Vienna 15 May 2018.

<https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/speeches/2018-05-15/remarks-austrian-world-summit>

² OECD, Security implications of climate change in the Sahel (SICCS), 2011

<http://www.oecd.org/swac/topics/siccs.htm>. Joint meetings of the Economic and Social Council and the Peacebuilding Commission on the themes “Linkages between climate change and challenges to peacebuilding and sustaining peace in the Sahel” and “The situation in the Sahel”, held in New York on 13 November 2018 and 28 June 2017, respectively, also sustain this analysis.

³ Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Working Group III, report 2018. As part of the Paris Agreement, countries made national commitments to take steps to reduce emissions and build resilience. The treaty also called for increased financial support from developed countries to assist the climate action efforts of developing countries.

⁴ The Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) is a regional political body which includes Djibouti, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan and Uganda.

variability.⁵ These natural disasters and climate change effects increasingly lead to displacement and other forms of human mobility. Many countries in the East/Horn of Africa and the Great Lakes region have been affected in recent years by severe floods with intervals of extreme droughts. In Burundi, for instance, the rains leading to flooding are seen to become increasingly severe every year. In 2020, Sudan recorded the highest rainfall in 60 years. Since 2020, several countries in the region have been affected by a severe locust infestation due to climatic factors that provided perfect breeding conditions for the locusts.

These climate-related shocks, environmental degradation and pressures are further drivers of vulnerability and displacement. The impacts of COVID-19 on the evolving protection crisis in Sub-Saharan African countries have been further compounded by some of the heaviest rains in over a decade. Widespread floods have affected hundreds of thousands of people, destroying homes, health centres, farmland and livelihoods. Along with host communities, refugees, internally displaced people and stateless persons many of whom live in these climate ‘hotspots’ typically lack the resources to adapt to an increasingly hostile environment. Furthermore, new displacement patterns and competition over depleted natural resources can spark conflict between communities or compound preexisting vulnerabilities.

“Forced displacement across borders can stem from the interaction between climate change and disasters with conflict and violence, or it can arise from natural or human-made disasters alone. Either situation can trigger international protection needs,” said Filippo Grandi, UN High Commissioner for Refugees.

The 2021 [UNHCR Strategic Framework for Climate Action](#) sets out the parameters for UNHCR’s response to the growing global climate emergency to be implemented through context-specific action plans developed and driven at the regional level in close collaboration with country operations, and in partnership with affected communities, host governments, UN Country Teams, NGOs, academics and other stakeholders. The framework supports international commitments related to climate change, disasters, and environmental degradation under the Global Compact on Refugees, the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration, and the Agenda for the Protection of Cross-Border Displaced Persons in the context of disasters and climate change, and aligns with several Sustainable Development Goals.⁶

The session will raise awareness of the UNHCR Framework for Climate Action and discuss how to operationalize the Framework in the region of Sub-Saharan Africa. It will also highlight NGO and civil society initiatives across Sub-Saharan Africa and identify areas for further joint advocacy and collaboration.

⁵ The 2011/2012 drought crisis in the IGAD region affected an estimated 13 million people, with tens of thousands more seeking refuge across international borders. While some people from drought-affected areas were able to benefit from refugee status and assistance in receiving countries, others did not. This highlights the gap in international and regional legal frameworks to fully address the distinct protection needs of disaster displaced persons, although some have argued that the African Union Refugee Convention may be applicable in certain circumstances.

⁶ https://disasterdisplacement.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/EN_Protection_Agenda_Volume_I_low_res.pdf