

Climate Change and Disaster Displacement: An Overview of UNHCR's role



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Why is climate change and disaster displacement a concern to UNHCR?

“Climate change is the defining challenge of our times: a challenge which interacts with and reinforces the other global megatrends such as population growth, urbanization, and growing food, water and energy insecurity. It is a challenge which is adding to the scale and complexity of human displacement; and a challenge that has important implications for the maintenance of international peace and security.”

- António Guterres, former High Commissioner for Refugees (in an address to the UN Security Council, 2011)

Disasters linked to natural hazards, including the adverse impacts of climate change, are drivers of contemporary displacement. Between 2008 and 2015, 203.4 million people were displaced by disasters, and the likelihood of being displaced by disasters has doubled since the 1970s (IDMC 2015). Climate change is also a threat multiplier, and may exacerbate conflict over depleted resources. Looking to the future, there is widespread agreement among scientists that the effects of climate change, in combination with other factors, will increase the displacement of people (IPCC 2014). Persons already displaced for other reasons – including refugees, stateless persons, and conflict IDPs – often reside in climate change hotspots and may be exposed to secondary displacement related to disasters and the effects of climate change. Their ability to return can be limited if their home areas are similarly impacted.

How is UNHCR addressing climate change and disaster displacement?

The engagement of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) on displacement in the context of disasters and climate change extends back to the mid-1990s, and advanced more concretely after 2000, both with regard to policy development and operational responses around the provision of protection and assistance to persons displaced in disaster and climate change contexts.

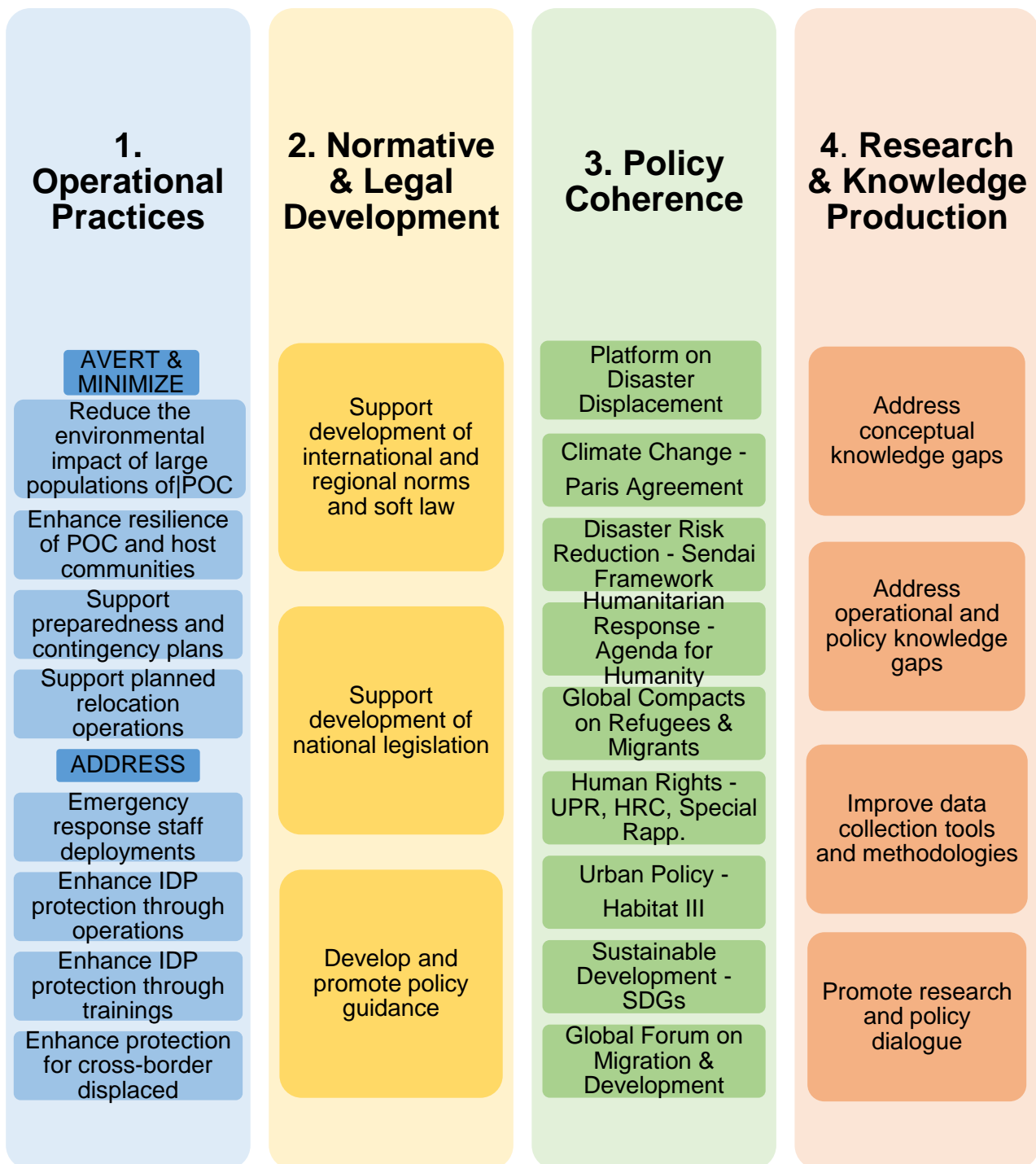
UNHCR's [2017-2021 Strategic Directions](#) includes commitments in relation to climate change and disaster displacement. These include commitments to:

“Protect” people in different regions of the world, including by “contributing to advancing legal, policy and practical solutions for the protection of people displaced by the effects of climate change and natural disasters, in recognition of the acute humanitarian needs associated with displacement of this kind, and its relationship to conflict and instability”.

“Respond”, including by “contributing to any inter-agency response to emergencies resulting from natural disasters, with a particular focus on providing protection leadership, where the three criteria of field presence, a government request, and inter-agency agreement are met”.

Aligned with these strategic directions, UNHCR's work on climate change and disaster displacement fall into four areas (see diagram below):

1. **Field operations** to avert, minimize and to address internal and cross-border disaster displacement.
2. **Legal advice, guidance and normative development** at national, regional and international levels to support enhanced protection of the rights of people displaced in the context of disasters and climate change.
3. **Policy coherence** to ensure that issues of disaster displacement are effectively mainstreamed across other relevant policy arenas.
4. **Research and knowledge production** to fill gaps that underpin this operational and policy work.



1. Operational engagement to avert, minimize and address disaster displacement

UNHCR's operational engagement spans across a broad understanding of displacement, from averting and minimizing to addressing climate change and disaster-related displacement.

1.1 Operational engagement to avert or minimize disaster displacement

Most refugees rely on their surrounding natural environment for food, water, livelihoods, shelter and fuel. A large population can put substantial pressure on the surrounding resources, with consequences for persons dependent on the environment. Additionally, limited access to sustainable energy can have severe repercussions on the socio-economic situation and safety of refugees. Humanitarian operations need to consider energy access and environmental management to enhance the well-being and protection of affected populations including host communities, and the sustainability of operations. UNHCR operational engagement includes the promotion of renewable energy sources at UNHCR-run camps, the use of energy-efficient technologies; and promotion of small scale forestry development. At the Headquarters level, UNHCR has developed a "green fleet policy" and a "green procurement policy" to guide environmentally sensitive procurement of resources.

These operational engagements also contribute to enhance the resilience of refugees and persons displaced internally and the communities hosting them, as a means to avoid secondary displacement. UNHCR has further developed Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) Operational Administrative Instructions that specify measures that operations can implement to plan for a camp in a manner that will avoid secondary displacement for refugees or IDPs, and the communities that host them.

UNHCR operational engagement also includes contingency planning and preparedness to prevent or reduce risks of disaster displacement. For example: As specified in UNHCR's [Emergency Handbook](#), UNHCR contributes to preparedness efforts led by the United Nations Resident Coordinator or Humanitarian Coordinator in each country. UNHCR's [Preparedness Package for Refugee Emergencies](#) (PPRE) includes a number of advanced preparedness actions (APAs) which allow the organization and partners to be ready to respond to displacement, both in disaster and conflict situations. The [Camp Management Toolkit](#), created by Camp Coordination and Camp Management Cluster¹, includes a number of provisions that aim to increase preparedness and reduce the risk of secondary displacement in the event of a disaster.

¹ The Camp Coordination and Camp Management Cluster includes UNHCR and IOM.

Some operations aim to relocate communities to minimize risk of forced displacement related to disasters. For example: after floods in Kenya's Kakuma Camp in 2014, UNHCR relocated refugees to higher ground. UNHCR has further developed guidance for states and other actors contemplating and implementing planned relocations (see section 2.3).

1.2 Operational response to address cross-border disaster displacement

In some cases, UNHCR is operationally involved in situations of cross-border displacement linked to sudden or slow onset natural hazards. For example, UNHCR staff provided support to persons displaced across border from Haiti to the Dominican Republic following the 2010 earthquake. In Haiti, UNHCR provided assistance including tents and non-food items, and protected affected populations together with OHCHR. In the Dominican Republic, UNHCR led the international community's protection response.

In additional situations, UNHCR is operationally engaged where climate change, disaster, displacement and conflict are inter-linked. When people are displaced across border in the context of disaster and climate change, they are not normally considered refugees under the [1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees](#), which describes a "well-founded fear of persecution" based on five grounds: race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group and political opinion.

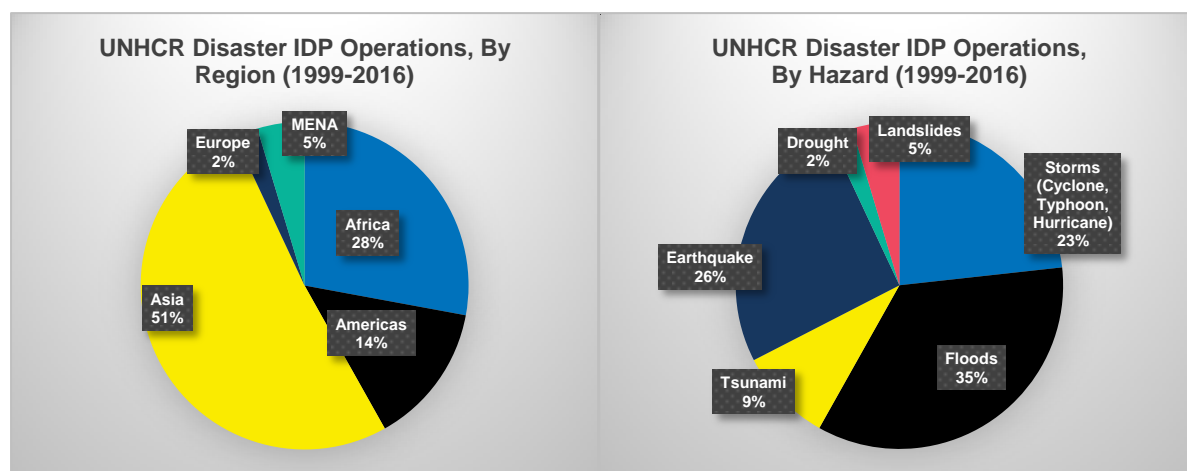
However, where disasters or slow onset events are linked to situations of armed conflict and violence people may fall with the refugee criteria of the 1951 Convention, as indicated in [2017 Legal Considerations](#). For example, this includes when the collapse of governmental authority triggered by a disaster leads to violence and unrest, or when disaster or slow onset is the result of armed conflict or violence. Similarly, it may apply when a particular ethnic, religious, national, social or political group is disproportionately affected by disaster and slow onset events as a result of conduct by 'persecutor'. Furthermore, it may apply when a government uses a disaster as pretext to persecute its opponents.

For example, in 2011 and 2012, a combination of drought and famine in the Horn of Africa, alongside conflict and persecution, led to a massive influx of Somalis into Kenya's Dadaab refugee camp. Their refugee status was granted "prima facie" because they had a well-founded fear of persecution and fit within the 1951 Convention's definition of a refugee, as well as within the definition in the Organization for African Unity (OAU) Convention, which includes "events seriously disturbing the public order".

1.3 Operational response to address internal disaster displacement

The majority of UNHCR's operational engagements in addressing protection and assistance needs of persons forced to flee by disasters have been situations of internal displacement. Since 1999, UNHCR has engaged in at least **43** situations where it provided protection and

assistance to internally displaced persons (IDPs) in the context of a disaster. The most common hazard that UNHCR responds to is **Floods** (35%) followed by **Earthquake** (26%), and the majority of engagement is in **Asia** (51%), followed by **Africa** (28%).



Under inter-agency arrangements at international level for IDPs, UNHCR is the Global Cluster Lead for Protection (Global Protection Cluster) and thus has specific responsibilities for the protection of those affected by disasters, including obligations arising from the principle of “provider of last resort.”² When the protection cluster is activated in disasters operations, UNHCR shares lead responsibility with UNICEF or OHCHR.. UNHCR currently leads the protection cluster in Ethiopia and in Myanmar, which began as conflict situations but are both now mixed conflict/slow onset climate change contexts.

Beyond situations in which the protection cluster is activated, UNHCR also protects and assist internally displaced persons (IDPs) in the context of disasters including through extensive involvement in support of governments with regard to protection (e.g. Ecuador 2016), while in other cases UNHCR assist with provision of material assistance such tents or other non-food items (NFIs).

UNHCR operational engagement to address internal disaster displacement also includes enhancing the capacity of states, international organizations and others to engage in protection of disaster IDPs. For example, the Global Protection Cluster’s Task Team on Learning (TTL) has developed a range of training modules to build and enhance the capacity on protection for disaster IDPs for UNHCR staff, Governments, Armed Forces, other UN Agencies, NGO partners. An entire training programme dedicated to these issues, entitled ‘[Protection in Natural Disasters](#)’, was conducted by UNHCR through the Global Protection Cluster in Fiji (2012), Pakistan (2013) and Haiti (2014), while other trainings, include

² The IASC included the concept of ‘provider of last resort’ in its cluster approach to guarantee predictability and accountability in humanitarian action. It is an essential element of UNHCR’s accountability as cluster lead. UNHCR is expected to do its utmost to fill critical gaps in funding, access to populations, or security, while working with the Humanitarian Coordinator and donors to mobilize resources, meet security challenges and remove obstacles to access.

modules on disaster displacement. In Pakistan (November 2016), a session on mainstreaming protection in seeking solutions to disaster displacement was held during a workshop. Beyond the GPC, in 2016, UNHCR Ecuador Office gave training on protection in disaster displacement situations to Government officials and armed forces, following the earthquake.

2. Development of legal standards

UNHCR supports and seeks to develop new international and regional norms, national legislation, and policy guidance, to address gaps and better protect the rights of people on the move in the context of disasters and climate change.

2.1 International and regional norms and soft law

UNHCR played an integral role in the development of the [Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement](#), and has promoted their use since their development in the early 2000s. These principles provide protection for Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in both conflict and disaster contexts.

On a regional level, UNHCR's technical support was crucial in ensuring that the 2014 [Brazil Declaration](#) and Plan of Action, which marked the 30th anniversary of Cartagena Declaration, included recognition of climate change and disaster-related displacement.

2.2 National legislation

UNHCR legal officers provide legal guidance to the process of development of national legislation to include protection options for people displaced by disasters and environmental drivers. UNHCR's Regional Office for the Americas has compiled [best practices](#) from Argentina, Brazil, Bolivia, Cuba, Panama, Peru, and Venezuela. It has moreover promoted action by governments to reinforce their national legislation in this area. Consequently, Argentina recently included [Humanitarian Visas](#) for disaster-displaced people in their national law with the support of UNHCR.

UNHCR is currently engaged in a process led by the Commonwealth, UNEP, and the UNFCCC on developing an interactive legal tool to support states in implementing the Paris Agreement and their nationally determined contributions. In December 2016, UNHCR participated in an expert meeting in London to contribute to designing the tool and to ensure climate change-related displacement is included as a thematic area.

UNHCR has also undertaken many initiatives to enable and bolster IDP protection at a national level. This includes in 2015 when UNHCR held a regional workshop focused on the

domestic implementation and operationalization of [the Kampala Convention](#), which specifically recognizes persons displaced internally by disasters and climate change impacts. Further, UNHCR contributes to many forums and conferences and courses, for example on protection in disaster displacement situations as part of a Course on the Law of Internal Displacement at the *International Institute for Humanitarian Law* in Sanremo, which aimed to build capacity of government officials to operationalize national laws on internal displacement in disaster contexts.

2.3 Policy guidance and guidelines

UNHCR has played an instrumental role in highlighting the protection gaps in respect of cross-border disaster displacement, and catalysing the process of the Nansen Initiative. This can be traced from UNHCR's 2011 Bellagio expert roundtable meeting on "[Climate Change and Displacement: Identifying Gaps and Responses](#)", and support to Norway to host a conference on Climate Change and Displacement in commemoration of the first High Commissioner for Refugees, Fridtjof Nansen, which resulted in the [Nansen Principles](#). Switzerland and Norway launched the Nansen Initiative at a side event of UNHCR 63rd Executive Committee (ExCom) Meeting in 2012. A collective grant from European Union (2013-2015) to UNHCR and the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) supported the Nansen Initiative program of activities, culminating in the endorsement of the Nansen Initiative [Protection Agenda](#) for cross-border disaster displacement by 109 States in 2015. Since 2016, UNHCR has [committed to support](#) the [Platform on Disaster Displacement](#) (PDD), a forum working to follow up the Nansen Initiative led by Germany, to implement the recommendations of the Nansen Initiative Protection Agenda, in particular through promotion of policy and normative development in gap areas.

In 2014, UNHCR developed [Guidelines on Temporary Protection or Stay Arrangements](#) (TPSAs) as responses to humanitarian crises and complex or mixed population movements, which can apply for persons fleeing disasters and climate change.

In 2015, UNHCR participated in the development of [Guidelines](#) on Migrants in Countries in Crisis (MICIC), which is a State-led process that seeks to improve the ability of States and other relevant stakeholders to assist migrants affected by crisis situations.

Finally, UNHCR, in collaboration with Brookings Institution and Georgetown University, developed [Guidance](#) to ensure that planned relocations are considered a measure of last resort, are undertaken in consultation with affected communities, and have safeguards in place. This Guidance built upon findings from expert meetings held in [Sanremo](#) in 2014 and Bellagio in 2015, and will be translated to practical tools for States contemplating and implementing relocations.

3. Global Policy Coherence

UNHCR plays a key role in promoting policy coherence and mainstreaming the protection dimensions of climate change and disaster-related displacement in relevant policy processes and in particular within and across 8 distinct policy areas:

1. Climate change negotiations through the UNFCCC and the implementation of the 2015 [Paris Agreement](#);
2. Disaster Risk Reduction, leading to the [Sendai Framework](#) and its implementation;
3. World Humanitarian Summit, leading to [Agenda for Humanity](#) and its implementation;
4. Process following the 2016 [New York Summit](#), providing a basis for the foreseen , Global Compact for Refugees and Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration;
5. UN Human Rights processes, including the Treaty bodies, Human Rights Council, OHCHR expert meetings, Universal Periodic Review and Special Mandate holders, among others;
6. Urban Policy, leading to Habitat III [New Urban Agenda](#) and its implementation;
7. Sustainable Development, including the [2020 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#);
8. Migration Policy Dialogues, including Global Forum on Migration and Development (GFMD).

UNHCR's engagement in some of these processes is particularly noteworthy. In the period of 2008 - 2016, UNHCR provided support to Parties of the UNFCCC for the consideration of human mobility in the climate change negotiations. From 2013-2016 UNHCR facilitated the Advisory Group on Climate Change and Human Mobility composed of UNHCR, IOM, UNDP, NRC/IDMC, Refugees International, RAED and University of Liege. This involved coordination of joint technical submissions to the UNFCCC and its subsidiary bodies, and organization and participation in side events, including over 20 events in Marrakech ([COP22](#)). UNHCR's involvement, in partnership with relevant stakeholders, was instrumental for the inclusion of human mobility issues in the 2010 [Cancun Adaptation Framework Paragraph 14f](#), and in the 2015 [Paris Agreement decision text Paragraph 49](#) which sets up a 'Force on Displacement' to which UNHCR is a member. UNHCR also actively contributes to the program of work of the Warsaw International Mechanism on loss and damage.

UNHCR has further been significantly involved in the process of the UN General Assembly [Summit](#) for Refugees and Migrants, which resulted in the NY Declaration on 19 September 2016. Both the Secretary General report and the [New York Declaration](#) made several references to the challenge posed by climate change and disaster displacement and referred to the Nansen Initiative Protection agenda as a solution to address this issue.

4. Research and Knowledge Production

UNHCR is contributing to addressing knowledge gaps, revising methodologies for data collection, and fostering dialogue and coordination among researchers.

4.1 Addressing knowledge gaps

UNHCR contributes to addressing gaps in the evidence base on climate change, disasters and human mobility. For example:

- To address gaps in understanding of climate change and human mobility across different regions, in 2009, UNHCR provided financial and technical support for the production of a report titled "[In Search of Shelter Mapping the Effects of Climate Change on Human Migration and Displacement](#)", which presented original maps of climate change impacts and population distributions in hotspots across the globe.
- In 2012, UNHCR, in partnership with UNU-EHS, London School of Economics, and University of Bonn, produced a report titled "[Climate Change, Vulnerability, and Human Mobility: Perspectives from the East and Horn of Africa](#)", which through refugee testimonies highlighted that climate change was a threat magnifier" and exacerbated conflict in refugee's countries of origin.
- To address conceptual gaps on statelessness related to climate change and sea level rise, UNHCR developed analysis in 2009 "[Climate Change and Statelessness](#)" and in 2011 "[Climate Change and the Risk of Statelessness: The Situation of Low-lying Island States](#)".
- To fill conceptual gaps in climate change policy, UNHCR contributed to UNU and Nansen Initiative Policy Briefs. This includes "[Changing Climate, Moving People: Framing Migration, Displacement, and Planned Relocation](#)" in 2013, and "Integration of Human Mobility Issues within National Adaptation Plans (NAPs)" in 2014.
- UNHCR Evaluation Services, in June 2010, commissioned and published "[Earth, wind and fire: A review of UNHCR's role in recent natural disasters](#)", to better understand the implications of an expanded role as lead of protection cluster at country level in disaster situations. In March 2013, Evaluation Services commissioned and published a report titled "[The World Turned Upside Down: A Review of Protection Risks and UNHCR's role in disasters](#)", which addressed important gaps in conceptual understanding of the specific protection needs of people displaced in the context of disasters and fed directly into the Nansen Initiative Protection Agenda.
- As a part of UNHCR's Legal Protection and Policy Research Series, the agency has commissioned experts to address knowledge gaps on protection. This includes: "[Protecting People Crossing Borders in the Context of Climate Change Normative Gaps and Possible Approaches](#)" (2012), and background papers to prepare for the 2011

UNHCR Expert Roundtable on Climate Change and Displacement held in Bellagio: "[Climate Change Displacement and International Law: Complementary Protection Standards](#)" (2011), and "[Protecting Environmentally Displaced People: Developing the capacity of Legal and Normative Frameworks](#)" (2011). These papers laid that conceptual groundwork on protection for disaster displaced that that was the foundation for the consultations of the Nansen Initiative, and ultimately is reflected in the Protection Agenda adopted in Geneva in October 2015.

4.2 Improve tools and methods

UNHCR also improves tools and methods utilized to collect and analyse displacement data to consider disaster dimensions. For example, as part of the steering group for the Mixed Migration Monitoring Mechanism Initiative ([4Mi](#)) in the Horn of Africa region, UNHCR provides inputs on additional questions about role of disasters as secondary drivers of displacement.

4.3 Foster dialogue and coordination of academic and policy communities

Notably, UNHCR actively participated in research dialogue and coordination through the Consultative Committee of the Nansen Initiative and now participates in the [Advisory Committee of the Platform on Disaster Displacement](#). Additionally, in 2016 UNHCR participated in the [launch](#) of a new international Association for Study of Environmental Migration, and the launch of the 'Hugo Observatory', a research center dedicated to environment and mobility in Liege Belgium.

UNHCR also contributes to disperse and communicate research outcomes with the broader academic and public community. For instance, with the support of the European Union, UNHCR commissioned an Issue of the [Forced Migration Review \(FMR 49\)](#) on 'Disasters and displacement in a changing climate' that published in May 2015 and includes 36 articles that gather latest available evidence on climate change, disasters and displacement.

Conclusion

At a macro level, UNHCR has played a pioneering role in raising awareness both of climate change as a driver of displacement and the need to address protection for people displaced in the context of disasters. UNHCR's activities have operated as a catalyst for global attention and action by States, other UN agencies, and civil society.

UNHCR engagement on these issues began as three separate streams of work – 1) addressing legal gaps related to cross-border disaster-displacement, 2) addressing gaps in operational response to protection of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in the context of disaster, and 3) addressing the impact of climate change on existing caseload of persons already displaced for other reasons. These three streams have converged over time. Today, UNHCR engagement includes many additional work streams in one multifaceted portfolio. UNHCR's activities on disasters and climate change displacement have also progressively increased in number and in diversity, acknowledging that addressing the role that climate change and disasters play in displacement is critical and inevitable.

Over the years, UNHCR has gained substantive experience with regards to averting, minimizing and addressing displacement in the context of disasters and climate change and is committed to continue supporting States and working with relevant partners to address challenges associated with climate change and disaster displacement in the future.

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