

UNHCR, Displacement & Disaster Risk Reduction

Why is Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) a concern for UNHCR?

1. The majority of people of concern to UNHCR (including refugees, asylum-seekers, returnees, internally displaced and stateless persons) are concentrated in disaster-prone areas and so-called climate change hotspots around the globe, facing a high risk of secondary or repeated displacement. Disasters caused by natural hazards can further exacerbate social tensions and act as an accelerator of conflict, which may result in displacement. For example, persistent droughts can bring pastoralist farmers and nomadic herders into competition for scarce natural resources, such as water and land.
2. Disasters are also increasingly a direct driver of internal displacement. For example, UNHCR responded in support of a government after sudden-onset hazards in 2016, such as the Earthquake in Ecuador or Hurricane Earl in Belize.

Vulnerability of Refugees and Other Persons of Concern

A UNHCR survey in 2015 found refugees and internally displaced persons were exposed to 150 disasters in sixteen countries during 2013 – 2014. Floods, landslides, severe storms, fires and other disasters affected some 380,000 persons; refugees living in camp settings are disproportionately likely to be secondarily displaced by disasters. Seven country operations had to suspend delivery of assistance altogether and three did so for more than one month.

There are many reasons for the high vulnerability of refugee camps to disasters associated with natural hazards. Refugee camps are often located in remote areas with limited access by road and to infrastructure. Camps may be located on land that is not traditionally considered suitable for human settlements. The lands are often too arid or too hilly. The camps in Rwanda, for example, are located on steep land prone to the risk of land-slides, which destroyed 250 shelters in 2014. Camps may be densely populated. A single fire can spread to dozens of houses in a flash. In a refugee camp in Thailand, one kitchen fire claimed the lives of 37 refugees and made 2,300 refugees homeless in March 2013.

Areas surrounding refugee camps, especially forests, often experience acute environmental degradation, mainly because refugees need wood as a source of cooking fuel and building materials. Deforestation increases the risk of disasters such as flood and drought. Finally, shelters for refugees and internally displaced persons are generally not resistant to natural hazards. In fact, in many emergency situations, refugees are only given simple shelter materials (i.e. plastic sheeting, wood) or tents, which can have a lifespan as short as several months.

Disaster Displacement

Sudden-onset disasters cause an average of 25.4 million displacements each year, according to IDMC estimates. Disaster displacement is often linked to extreme weather-related events, such as floods and tropical storms, although earthquakes and other geophysical hazards also lead to massive displacement. Climate change is already increasing the frequency and intensity of such weather-related hazards, as well as exacerbating slow-onset events such as drought, glacial retreat, sea level rise and saltwater intrusion.

Displacement rarely occurs as a consequence of a natural hazard alone but often occurs in a complex context of rapid population growth in hazard-prone areas, poor land management and building standards, inadequate governance, poverty, inequality and weak protection of vulnerable populations. Disaster displacement has devastating impacts on individuals, their families and livelihoods. It raises multiple protection concerns and should be prevented wherever possible.

The risk of disaster-related displacement can be reduced through effective disaster risk reduction, adaptation, and development planning, especially when these initiatives are integrated. Investments in resilience, for example, can help communities withstand disaster-related shocks and stresses, and help communities recover more quickly when disasters do occur.¹ Evidence shows that the human and financial costs of responding to the aftermath of disasters will be far greater than investing in preparatory measures now: one dollar spent on preparedness today equals three-four dollars saved after a disaster strikes.² It is key to ensure that these preventive measures to avert and minimize displacement are protection-sensitive and people-centered. UNHCR's AGD approach and expertise is integral to ensure that protection is considered in preparedness activities to minimize risk of disaster displacement.

¹ <http://www.unhcr.org/540854f49.pdf>

² <https://www.nanseninitiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/7.pdf>

UNHCR DRR activities

Enhance Resilience for Persons of Concern

UNHCR acknowledges that disasters will have a significant impact on its population of concern across all of its operations as the effects of climate change compound the negative impacts of displacement. It also recognises the importance of enhancing the sustainability of its operations, both at an organisational and programming level. UNHCR supports a range of environment resilience projects, including reforestation, promotion of clean cooking and environmental awareness campaigns. Building environmental resilience enhances the protection of refugees, reduces competition for resources and improves relations with host communities. Sustainability is reflected in UNHCR's work towards increasing renewable energy options for refugees, such as increasing access to lighting at household and community levels, promoting a range of appropriate clean cooking solutions and providing alternatives to diesel generator for producing electricity. UNHCR is currently institutionalizing cash-based assistance which will empower people to become consumers and entrepreneurs, strengthening self-reliance and resilience and adding value to local economies.

In 2016 UNHCR launched a pilot disaster risk screening initiative in selected refugee operations in Kenya, Rwanda, Uganda and Ethiopia. For example, the study in Kakuma refugee camp, Kenya, identified flooding as the most common disaster, occurring at least 2- 3 times per year and causing inundation and destruction of shelters; and filling and overflowing of latrines and waste collection areas with associated sanitation risks, including outbreaks of water and vector-borne diseases.

UNHCR also organized a Training Workshop on Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) in Kigali (18-20 April 2017) following disaster risk screenings to build the awareness of UNHCR, Partners and government staff in the target countries (Rwanda, Kenya, Ethiopia and Uganda). Furthermore, UNHCR has begun drafting its plan of action on DRR for field operations.

Through the Global Strategy for Settlement & Shelter 2014-2018, UNHCR is introducing environmental resilience through site planning approaches. Technical assessments, supported by satellite imagery and other advanced technology, aid in identifying sites that are less prone to flooding, erosion and other natural hazards. UNHCR provides technical support to partners and refugee communities for site planning and shelter construction and maintenance. Additionally, UNHCR is conducting extensive research on alternative shelter solutions to provide safe and dignified homes for persons of concern.

Ensure mainstreaming of disaster displacement in relevant policy processes

UNHCR actively supported the Nansen Initiative, which from 2012-2015 undertook a inter-governmental and civil society regional consultations, including on provisions to manage disaster displacement risks in country of origin to prevent cross-border disaster displacement. This process culminated in the Protection Agenda,³ endorsed by 109 entities in October 2015, which is now

³ <https://nanseninitiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/PROTECTION-AGENDA-VOLUME-1.pdf>

implemented by the Platform on Disaster Displacement (PDD) led by Germany. Since 2016, UNHCR is a core member of the Platform on Disaster Displacement's coordination unit and advisory committee, and as indicated in the PDD workplan, is committed to working with partners to ensure displacement is included in the implementation of the Sendai Framework on disaster risk reduction.

For example, UNHCR committed to contribute to development of a 'Words Into Action: Implementation Guide for the Sendai Framework' on questions of mobility, displacement, relocation and evacuation, in accordance with the Platform on Disaster Displacement Workplan.

UNHCR Global Learning Centre has also developed and implemented trainings on 'Protection and Disaster Risk Reduction'. For example, in April 2017 at the request of Philippines Government, UNHCR regional office colleagues led a training on 'Protection in Preparedness' through the Global Protection Cluster.

Furthermore, in reaction to, or in anticipation of, the impact of disasters and the adverse effects of climate change, many communities and governments are contemplating and implementing measures to move vulnerable populations to safety and a sustainable future. However, relocation processes may carry serious risks for those it intends to benefit, and must be considered as a last resort and only undertaken in full consultation with affected communities. If undertaken in a planned and people-centred approach, planned relocation can be a disaster risk reduction strategy to prevent future disaster displacement. Since 2013, the UNHCR-Brookings Institute-Georgetown partnership has developed Guidance on preventing forced displacement through Planned Relocation,⁴ and is now in the process of translating this principled guidance into practical tools for states contemplating and implementing planned relocations.

Key Messages for the 2017 Global Platform

A 'people-centred' protection perspective is integral for effective Disaster Risk Reduction: persons already displaced or at risk of displacement need to be recognized as particularly vulnerable and have unique protection needs related to their history of mobility and hazard exposure. At the same time, displaced populations have developed incredible resilience and have skills and capacities to offer to host communities in disaster risk reduction activities.

UNHCR key messages for the Global Platform pertain to two areas of UNHCR's work. In implementation of Sendai Framework, UNHCR calls on Governments, local authorities and other DRR actors to make sure that DRR strategies and plans at local, national and regional levels include 1) provisions on refugees and persons of concern already displaced, and 2) provisions on preventing, addressing, and promoting solutions to displacement associated with disasters, in support of the key messages of the Platform on Disaster Displacement (PDD).⁵

⁴ <http://www.unhcr.org/protection/environment/54082cc69/final-report-planned-relocation-disasters-climate-change-consolidating.html>

<http://www.unhcr.org/protection/environment/562f798d9/planned-relocation-guidance-october-2015.html>

⁵ <http://disasterdisplacement.org/disaster-displacement-at-gp17/>

1) Provisions on refugees and persons of concern already displaced:

- Refugees, asylum-seekers, and other persons of concern should be specifically recognized in national DRR planning and response mechanisms, including contingency planning and Early Warning Systems. It is important to recognize both their needs, as they are new to a locality and may have different coping capacities, but also their abilities as displaced persons have skills to offer to support communities in DRR efforts
- Governments and other relevant organizations should cooperate with UNHCR to ensure minimization of the risks posed by natural hazards by selecting the least disaster-prone site for refugee settlement.
- Governments and other relevant organizations should work with UNHCR to collect data on disasters affecting refugees and other people forcibly displaced.

2) Provisions on disaster displacement:

To prevent displacement and reduce displacement risk:

- Scale up efforts to reduce disaster and climate risk and strengthening the resilience and adaptive capacity of people at risk of displacement, by investing in infrastructure, safe housing and access to basic services, livelihood diversification, food security, land use planning and reform, and environmental restoration.
- Include planned relocation processes as a protective measure of last resort, and ensure process is participatory and safeguards human rights, as per the 'Guidance on Planned Relocations' developed by UNHCR, Georgetown University and Brookings Institution.

To address the protection needs of displaced people:

- Establish capacity for preparedness and community-based early warning systems in order to prepare for evacuations if displacement becomes unavoidable, ensuring the protection of all displaced persons including vulnerable groups.
- Prepare for cross-border disaster-displacement through regional and transboundary cooperation and joint contingency-planning, and provide humanitarian protection as per the Nansen Initiative Protection Agenda.

To promote durable solutions to disaster displacement:

- As part of post-disaster recovery and rehabilitation, "build back better" and ensure that disaster displaced persons who can return or settle elsewhere have access to adequate housing, basic services and the restoration of livelihoods.

For more information, see: <http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/climate-change-and-disasters.html>