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KEY CONCEPTS

ON CLIMATE CHANGE AND DISASTER DISPLACEMENT

DISASTERS

are not “natural”, rather are the combined result of exposure to a natural hazard with an affected community’s adaptive capacity based on their pre-existing vulnerabilities. A disaster is a “serious disruption of the functioning of a community or a society involving widespread human, material, economic or environmental losses and impacts, which exceeds the ability of the affected community or society to cope using its own resources.” ([UNISDR](#)) Disasters can be linked to sudden or slow onset natural hazards, including but not limited to those related to climate change impacts.

SUDDEN-ONSET DISASTERS

can be linked to meteorological hazards including tropical cyclones, typhoons, hurricanes, tornadoes, blizzards; hydrological hazards including coastal floods, mudflows; or geophysical hazards including earthquakes, tsunamis, volcanic eruptions ([UNISDR](#)).

SLOW-ONSET EVENTS

include sea level rise, increasing temperatures, ocean acidification, glacial retreat and related impacts, salinization, land and forest degradation, loss of biodiversity and desertification ([decision 1/CP.16 UNFCCC](#)).

RISK

is the combination of the probability of an event and its negative consequences” and is determined by a combination of exposure to a natural hazard, the vulnerability of an individual or community, and the nature of the hazard itself ([UNISDR](#)).

EXPOSURE

refers to “people, property, systems, or other elements present in hazard zones that are thereby subject to potential losses” ([UNISDR](#)).

RESILIENCE

means the “ability of a system, community or society exposed to hazards to resist, absorb, accommodate to and recover from the effects of a hazard in a timely and efficient manner, including through the preservation and restoration of its essential basic structures and functions” ([UNISDR/IPCC](#)).

ADAPTATION

refers to “the process of adjustment to actual or expected climate and its effects” that “seeks to moderate or avoid harm or exploit beneficial opportunities” ([IPCC](#)).

LOSS AND DAMAGE

refers to the “actual and/or potential manifestation of impacts associated with climate change in developing countries that negatively affect human and natural systems” ([IPCC](#)).

HUMAN MOBILITY

is an overarching umbrella term that refers to three forms of population movement: i) Displacement – the primarily forced movement of persons; ii) Migration – the primarily voluntary movement of persons, iii) Planned relocation – process of settling persons or communities to a new location (UNFCCC Decision 1/CP.16 Cancun Climate Change Adaptation Framework Paragraph 14f).

DISASTER DISPLACEMENT

refers to “situations where people are forced to leave their homes or places of habitual residence as a result of a disaster or in order to avoid the impact of an immediate and foreseeable natural hazard. Such displacement results from the fact that affected persons are (i) exposed to (ii) a natural hazard in a situation where (iii) they are too vulnerable and lack the resilience to withstand the impacts of that hazard” ([Nansen Initiative Protection Agenda 2015](#)).

INTERNALLY DISPLACED PERSONS (IDPS)

are people or groups of people who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognized State border ([Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement](#)).

CROSS BORDER DISASTER DISPLACEMENT

refers to situations where people flee or are displaced across borders in the context of sudden- or slow-onset disasters, or in the context of the effects of climate change (Platform on Disaster Displacement). While the majority of disaster displacement is internal, the Nansen Initiative has “identified at least 50 countries that in recent decades have received or refrained from returning people in the aftermath of disasters” ([Nansen Initiative Protection Agenda 2015](#)).

MIGRATION

refers to “human movements that are preponderantly voluntary insofar as people, while not necessarily having the ability to decide in complete freedom, still possess the ability to choose between different realistic options. In the context of slow-onset natural hazards, environmental degradation and the long-term impacts of climate change, such migration is often used to cope with, “avoid or adjust to” deteriorating environmental conditions that could otherwise result in a humanitarian crisis and displacement in the future” ([Nansen Initiative Protection Agenda 2015](#)).

PLANNED RELOCATION

can be described as “a planned process in which persons or groups of persons move or are assisted to move away from their homes or places of temporary residence, are settled in a new location, and provided with the conditions for rebuilding their lives.” Planned relocation can be voluntary or involuntary, and usually takes place within the country, but may, in very exceptional cases, also occur across State borders. ([Planned Relocation Guidance 2015](#))

PROTECTION

All activities aimed at obtaining full respect for the rights of the individual, in accordance with the letter and the spirit of the relevant bodies of law (i.e. international human rights law, international humanitarian law and refugee law) ([UNHCR Global Report 2015](#)).

PLATFORM ON DISASTER DISPLACEMENT (PDD) –

The main objective of the Platform on Disaster Displacement is to follow-up on the work started by the Nansen Initiative consultative process, and to implement the recommendations of the [Nansen Initiative Protection Agenda](#), endorsed by 109 governmental delegations during a Global Consultation in October 2015. UNHCR directly supports the Platform on Disaster Displacement [Coordination Unit](#) through a Program officer, is a member of the [Advisory Committee](#), and is an observer to [Steering Group](#) of States.

WIM TASK FORCE ON DISPLACEMENT

UNHCR is also a member of the Task Force on Displacement of the UNFCCC Warsaw International Mechanism on Loss and damage associated with climate change impacts (WIM), created by the [Paris Agreement Decision Text](#) to develop recommendations for “integrated approaches to address, minimize and avert displacement associated with climate change”.

NOTE: CLIMATE REFUGEE

The term “**Climate Refugee**” is often used in the media, however, this concept is misleading and does not exist in international law, as a “refugee” has crossed an international border “owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion” ([1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees](#)). Climate change affects people inside their own countries, and typically creates internal displacement before it reaches a level where it pushes people across borders. Nonetheless, there may be situations where the refugee criteria of the 1951 Convention may apply, for example if drought-related famine is linked to situations of armed conflict and violence. Regardless, the term “climate refugee” is not endorsed by the UNHCR or by the Platform on Disaster Displacement, and it is preferable to refer to “**persons displaced in the context of disasters and climate change**”.

NOTE: ROLE OF CLIMATE CHANGE

There is high agreement among scientists that the effects of climate change, in combination with other factors, will increase the displacement of people ([IPCC 2014](#)). This includes: i) Climate change is expected to increase the frequency and intensity sudden-onset natural hazards which can lead to internal or cross border disaster displacement; ii) Climate change is also expected to increase slow-onset hazards which can reduce the threshold at which point people are forced to flee, and also hinder the potential for displaced persons to return to their places of habitual residence; iii) Climate change impacts may further serve as a “threat multiplier” that exacerbates potential for conflict and consequent displacement, **although these inter-linkages are complex, multi-causal and should not be oversimplified.**