

Readiness Assessment of UNHCR's Focus Area Strategic Plan for Climate Action

Executive Summary



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UNHCR's Evaluation Office (EvO) commissioned a global strategic and thematic Readiness Assessment (RA) to provide a formative assessment of how well-positioned UNHCR is to implement its Focus Area Strategic Plan for Climate Action (FASP); hereafter referred to as the Strategic Plan) (2024–2030). The RA was Phase 1 of a planned longitudinal evaluation. The RA sought to generate evidence, identify lessons learned, and provide recommendations to strengthen UNHCR's approach to climate action (CA); to ultimately support organizational capacity to support forcibly displaced persons, stateless individuals, and host communities in countries that are particularly vulnerable to climate change.

The RA was designed around a set of six 'enabling dimensions': key organizational features and conditions necessary for effective implementation of the Strategic Plan. These dimensions were assessed to determine the extent to which they were in place across UNHCR operations.

The RA provides an overall organizational-level assessment (narrative), supported and informed by: a regional readiness assessment (including regional readiness scores and drawing from a sub-sample of the 22 priority countries from the Strategic Plan); five case studies of work under the Strategic Plan's Priority Actions; analysis of primary (Key Informant Interviews and Focus Group Discussions at all three organizational levels) and secondary data and documentation. In developing this analysis, the AT responded to the five key assessment questions below:

- AQ1: To what extent does UNHCR have the necessary enabling dimensions in place to effectively operationalize, monitor, and achieve its four inter-related objectives, priority actions and programming outputs and accelerate climate action?
- AQ2: Which specific enabling dimensions (or combination thereof), in which contexts, require strengthening in order to accelerate progress towards achievement of these objectives, priority actions and outputs?
- AQ3: What other actors and factors have hindered or supported UNHCR's ability to leverage the enabling dimensions and operationalize Climate Action so far in UNHCR?
- AQ4: What conclusions and recommendations can be drawn to support RB and CO implementation of the Strategic Plan? What conclusions can be drawn regarding the relevance and appropriateness of the Strategic Plan?
- AQ5: Which areas of inquiry should be prioritized in the second phase of the longitudinal evaluation (noting that the second phase is currently on hold)?

In terms of the RA findings, the AT developed findings for each of the enabling dimensions, drawing from the assessment across the six regions sampled. The table below presents the AT's assessment of these enabling dimensions, aligning to AQs 1, 2 and 3 in particular.

Leadership, Strategic Planning, Governance and Accountability

UNHCR's approach to climate action has been inconsistent across regions and country operations, with progress largely driven by individual champions rather than clear leadership and accountability structures. Despite central efforts to define its stance, the restructuring has led to mixed messaging, causing confusion about priorities and risking a slowdown or reversal of progress. Strategic planning varies widely by context and leadership, but implementation is threatened by funding and staff cuts, and there is low awareness of the Strategic Plan's details. Governance gaps persist, with limited focal points and weak HQ-regional-country connections, while opportunities exist to prioritize actions, strengthen coherence, and leverage UNHCR's

cluster leadership role to integrate climate into protection and emergency preparedness frameworks.

Processes and Systems

UNHCR has demonstrated strong innovation and good practices in integrating climate action into risk management, emergency preparedness, and operations, including the development of a Climate Risk Toolkit and shifts toward anticipatory action in some regions. However, further checks, accountability and consistency are required in terms of the integration of climate or environmental risks (and opportunities) in risk management and emergency preparedness tools and processes. Strong progress has also been made through initiatives like Greening the Blue and the Green Financing Facility, though awareness and funding remain limited, and sustainability is not fully embedded across supply chains. Operational examples show significant social and environmental benefits, but many initiatives are stalled due to funding cuts and loss of technical capacity. Innovation is an organizational strength, supported by dedicated funds and embedded officers, while UNHCR's expertise in Age, Gender, and Diversity (AGD) offers a cost-effective and influential entry point to ensure inclusion of persons of concern in climate action policies and programs.

Data & Evidence

While climate-related data is widely available, the challenge lies in tools and staff capacity to access, analyze, and apply this information, particularly at localized levels. Innovations such as the Climate Vulnerability Assessment and Climate Risk Toolkit show promise, but gaps remain in context-specific insights. Whilst RBM compliance is reasonable, climate markers are inconsistently applied and fail to capture the full scope of activities. Evaluation and learning processes are limited and largely ad hoc, hindering knowledge sharing, replication of best practices, and evidence generation for funders. Reporting on climate action is not mandated at country level and remains fragmented, reducing visibility of progress and opportunities for organizational alignment and resource mobilization.

People, Capacity & Culture

The greatest risk to UNHCR's climate action is the significant loss of staff following funding cuts, which has dismantled many climate teams, eliminated focal points, and eroded technical capacity, institutional memory, and partnerships, impacting both implementation and fundraising for large-scale projects. While staff generally show commitment to climate issues, organizational culture varies, often lacking due to an absence of strong leadership, guidance, and structure. There is no standardized training or induction on climate action, nor role-specific learning, and performance frameworks do not include climate indicators. Regional Bureaux have played a key role in partnerships and technical leadership, but their diminished capacity means HQ will need to provide stronger support, particularly in advocacy, resource mobilization, and technical assistance, as countries express a clear need for increased communication and engagement with HQ.

Resource Mobilization & Management

Resource mobilization for climate action within UNHCR is highly context-dependent, with greater success achieved through integrating climate considerations into traditional proposals such as emergency response and disaster risk reduction, while access to vertical climate funds remains limited due to organizational constraints, accreditation requirements, and systems not suited for projectized funding. Although compliance with climate markers has improved, their inconsistent use and limited scope hinder effective resource tracking, fundraising, and reporting. Innovative financing approaches like parametric insurance and

carbon credits are being explored but remain nascent. Overall, significant opportunities exist to strengthen technical capacity, partnerships, and resource tracking to unlock funding from emerging sources, including multilateral climate funds and private sector contributions. 9

Strategic Positioning & Partnerships

UNHCR's strategic positioning and partnerships for climate action have only grown in importance, following the hollowing of UNHCR's capacity. Units like OSACA have strengthened external visibility, while UN and multilateral partnerships are becoming essential as donors favor joint proposals. Public sector partnerships remain strong, offering cost-effective entry points for including persons of concern in national climate policies, while private sector engagement, such as carbon finance, is emerging as a critical funding source. Refugee-led organizations provide sustainable, locally driven solutions that align with UNHCR's 'sustainable response' approach, and research partnerships, notably with CGIAR, have delivered valuable technical support, though broader academic engagement remains fragmented and outcome-limited. Strengthening these partnerships is key to advancing UNHCR's climate objectives in a resource-constrained environment, particularly as the climate funds and other donors look for joint approaches.

Other Lessons Learned

In terms of lessons learned on UNHCR's journey to implementing climate action, the AT note that despite the resource-constrained environment, CA remains a strategic opportunity for UNHCR to advance its mandate if effectively integrated into core operations. CA can deliver multiple benefits beyond environmental resilience, including improved protection outcomes, social cohesion, and livelihoods opportunities. Examples include environmental protection projects and disaster risk reduction planning which can foster collaboration between refugees and host communities, strengthening social ties. Initiatives including green jobs can provide income opportunities and integrate refugees into local economies, whilst also enhancing environmental protection, supporting ecosystems and delivering economic benefits. To maximize impact, UNHCR must work closely with national actors to ensure activities align with national policies and market demand

UNHCR's field presence, protection and AGD expertise and wealth of data position it well to do this. UNHCR is a trusted partner at global, national, and local levels, offering leverage to influence climate policies and platforms at national level, and at global level such as at the COPs and the Global Refugee Forum. With clearer messaging and mandate clarification, UNHCR could capitalize on this positioning to advocate for refugee-inclusive climate initiatives and support implementation of projects funded through mechanisms like the Green Climate Fund or World Bank's IDA window, ensuring protection and inclusion of displaced populations. This approach offers strong value for money and creates opportunities for refugees to be integrated into national climate strategies, plans, policies, and infrastructure projects.

Success in this will depend on strong internal and external alignment. Internally, leadership, governance, and organizational culture are critical enablers, as demonstrated by progress in several regions based on coherent planning and senior management support, despite limited resources. Externally, partnerships at national level with governments, multilateral agencies, and refugee-led organizations offer significant opportunities to embed refugee inclusion in climate frameworks and programs. Clear messaging on UNHCR's mandate and role in climate action is essential, particularly regarding disaster preparedness and response beyond conflict zones whilst legal and policy innovations at global level will be vital as climate change increasingly drives displacement.

Summary of Key Conclusions in relation to the Assessment Questions

AQ1) Due to extensive changes in the external environment, leading to severe funding cuts and subsequently substantive staffing losses, UNHCR is less ready than it was a year ago to implement its Strategic Plan for Climate Action. Senior leadership requires to affirm whether or not climate action remains a priority for the organization, and in turn to specify the key priorities (geographically and operationally) on which to focus extremely limited resources. In order to capitalize on hard work and efforts to-date, there are many good practices and tools.

outlined in this report which can support ongoing efforts once priorities are made clear. Improvements are needed to climate monitoring, reporting and knowledge management to ensure better capture of progress, lessons and good practice/tools; and to avoid further related losses related to future staff departure or movements.

AQ2) The new context that the organization finds itself in necessitates increased and clearer senior/executive leadership and accountability for climate action, and a reprioritization of the Strategic Plan and related activities.

Climate action is not robustly or comprehensively integrated across key processes and systems, with opportunities being missed to increase resilience of displacement settings and protect vulnerable populations from climate risks. Key priorities are risk management and emergency preparedness.

Partnerships are already a key modality for UNHCR, but will become even more so in order to 'combine forces' with others on various fronts (e.g. ensuring mitigation efforts are not set back or reversed by developing partnerships with peer agencies and the private sector; nurturing key strategic partnerships such as with CGIAR to ensure continued access to key climate data and analysis to inform prioritization and decision-making, and nurturing the partnership with the GCF in terms of increased access to and influence over MCF funding sources and spend).

AQ3) Enabling factors internally include strengths in AGD integration into climate activities, innovation and locally led approaches — providing good practice examples and lessons around environmentally, socially and economically sustainable models for climate action in humanitarian settings. Enabling factors externally include increasing visibility and awareness of climate issues due to media interest and key international/global events (e.g. COP), providing UNHCR with a 'license to operate' and public support in terms of climate action, as well as increased profile and influence through attendance at COP and similar events.

Hindering factors internally include difficulty in sourcing key technical skillsets for innovative climate projects and MCF proposals, and difficulty in mobilizing at pace to respond to MCF and similar 'alternative funding' opportunities. Externally, a lack of understanding of human mobility specifically in relation to climate change has limited wider engagement with this issue, but this also presents an opportunity for UNHCR in terms of external positioning and influence.

AQ4) The Strategic Plan in its current form is no longer fit-for-purpose in the current organizational context. The AT has thus provided some strategic and operational recommendations to support essential prioritization of UNHCR's climate action strategy and activities. Improved senior/executive leadership and accountability is requested by RBx and COs to provide clarity on climate action, with respect to the organizational mandate and the way forward under the current resource-constrained scenario.

AQ5) Suggested focal areas for a Phase 2 evaluation against the Strategic Plan include: nurturing and growth of key partnerships to support leveraging and influence of climate-related funding; sustained and improved internal and external leadership regarding climate action for the protection of FDPs; the degree of integration of climate and sustainability considerations across core systems and processes; improvements to knowledge retention, sharing, learning and reporting on climate action. It is also suggested that any Phase 2 evaluation includes case studies regarding key innovations (e.g. parametric insurance with ARC) highlighted in this assessment.

Recommendations

This readiness assessment has come at a key juncture for UNHCR. 2025 was a turbulent year for the humanitarian sector and global climate action as a whole. UNHCR experienced huge cuts to its funding, and the loss of many key staff as a result. The arrival of the new High Commissioner at the beginning of 2026 will be a pivotal moment as UNHCR decides upon its strategic direction in the years to come.

Despite the substantive global shifts, the impacts that the climate crisis presents remain constant. The numbers of forcibly displaced people will continue to grow, and those that are already displaced will be amongst the most at risk. Therefore, UNHCR cannot ignore the climate crisis. Instead, it must be decisive on where and how it can intervene most effectively and use its reduced resources accordingly.

To support this, the AT have provided two levels of recommendations. The first set are strategic recommendations to guide these key strategic decisions that UNHCR will make in the following months (focused on the three pillars of the Strategic Plan: International Protection; Adaptation and Resilience, and Mitigation); and the second set are operational recommendations to support implementation of the strategic recommendations — continuing improvements, building on good practice and progress identified, and addressing specific gaps in operational readiness in order to implement a revised Strategic Plan.

The recommendations are presented in order of priority and build on the findings and lessons presented. It is anticipated that the three Strategic Recommendations (presented below) will warrant a Management Response, with the Operational Recommendations (see main body of report) guiding the implementation of that response.

No	Strategic Plan Pillar	Recommendation
1	International Protection	UNHCR should maintain a priority focus on advocacy and Leveraging for Inclusion of forcibly displaced persons in climate action policies, programs, platforms and fora. However, given limited resources and budget, there is a need to revisit the strategy, and ensure that efforts are focused where there is most comparative advantage and potential for impact. This will necessitate continued and increased alignment with other UN agencies and investing in the nurturing and development of key strategic partnerships (e.g. with GCF on Climate Action Coalition in FCAS – directly linking to potential for further funding) in order to combine resources and complementary skillsets. Focus on instruments such as the GRF climate action pledge process with significant leveraging potential, at both global and national levels, will also be key.

2	Adaptation & Resilience	<p>A) UNHCR should reduce the number of climate action priority countries and therefore reduce the number of countries with specific adaptation and resilience projects. We also suggest that it would be more appropriate to change the terminology to ‘climate focal’ and ‘climate mainstreaming’ countries.</p> <p>A smaller set of priority (or as above ‘focal countries’) countries should be identified where focussed efforts or initiatives will be supported, with two objectives/lenses:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Highest climate vulnerability</i> – the forcibly displaced populations and settlements/operations which are most exposed to climate risk should be identified for prioritisation of adaptation, resilience-building and anticipatory action efforts (e.g. tree nurseries/cocooning and greenbelt construction). This will necessitate continued investment in key strategic partnerships (e.g. CGIAR) to access data to inform decision-making, as well as further development of partnerships (including private sector partnerships) to support innovation around and implementation of anticipatory action activities (e.g. as with current examples such as the parametric insurance partnership with ARC in RSA – now part of RB EHAGL). • <i>Highest potential for accessing and influencing the Multilateral Climate Funds</i> – those countries or groups of countries with existing (e.g. Tanzania) or pipeline funding for the MCFs (or high potential for securing or influencing such funding – e.g. Nigeria, Bangladesh) should be identified. This will require close collaboration with DER’s Climate Finance team. This again will require effort and investment in nurturing and developing key partnerships with peer agencies and others, to access complementary skillsets and resources, and also to enable successful proposals and influencing to ensure these funding pots are directed towards forcibly displaced people where possible. <p>B) UNHCR should focus efforts and resources towards further and more comprehensive <u>integration</u> and mainstreaming of climate action considerations (particularly in terms of climate risk identification and preparedness/anticipatory action) across <u>all operations and countries</u>. Therefore, it is proposed that all countries are expected to reach a ‘minimum standard of climate action’, in particular which identifies and mitigates key climate risks to operations and forcibly displaced persons. Note, this will still require some investment and/or strategic partnerships to enable access to technical skillsets and staff resource to guide improved integration, as well as ensuring access to key data to inform decision-making.</p>
3	Mitigation	<p>UNHCR should look to sustain and fund mitigation efforts by making this a focus and specific inclusion in funding proposals and looking to sustain the central Green Financing Facility. Again, partnerships with other UN agencies and the private sector are key both to pool resources and skillsets, and to access innovation and additional funding.</p>