The global climate crisis is a human crisis, amplifying the drivers of forced displacement within and across borders for millions of people and increasing risks of statelessness. Millions that are displaced today, be they internally displaced, refugees or stateless, are living in highly climate-vulnerable as well as fragile and conflict-affected situations. As a result, they may lack access to services that are environmentally sustainable, and they have few or no means to prepare for, withstand and recover from loss of life or livelihoods due to climatic shocks and stresses.

In the last 10 years, the relationship between climate change impacts and conflict has become particularly apparent. In 2022, 84 per cent of refugees and asylum seekers fled from countries which are highly climate-vulnerable, compared to 61 per cent in 2010. The scope for people safely and sustainably to return to highly climate-vulnerable countries and communities is also reducing, as climate-sensitive livelihoods are rendered untenable, exposure to extreme weather and degraded environments makes conditions in some areas unliveable, and competition over depleted ecosystem services such as food, water and land prolongs conflict and instability. Moreover, the climate crisis is not gender-neutral. Women and girls suffer the greatest impacts of climate change. Their vulnerability to climate shocks in many cases is compounded by pre-existing discrimination, gender-based violence, including conflict-related sexual violence, human trafficking, and child marriage.

This Strategic Plan for Climate Action sets out a global roadmap for UNHCR’s accelerated efforts to reduce and manage the effects of climate change on those displaced and stateless, building on the 2021 Strategic Framework for Climate Action. This document provides a brief narrative summary of the plan which will be launched by early 2024.

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1 If the Ukraine crisis is factored in, this figure is 69%. The criterion for identifying the total number of refugees and asylum seekers originated from highly climate-vulnerable countries is set using the 2020 ND-GAIN Country Index. Countries that fall into the lowest 25% (quartile) of the ND-GAIN index are classified as highly climate-vulnerable countries.”
1. What is the challenge? How does it relate to UNHCR’s role and mandate?

First, there are growing numbers of forcibly displaced and stateless people who have protection needs in the context of the impacts of climate change.

UNHCR’s mandate and leadership role for providing international protection under its 1950 Statute relates to three broad categories of people who have international protection needs in the context of climate change. First, people who are refugees under the 1951 Convention definition when they flee conflict or violence caused or exacerbated by the effects of climate change and disaster, rendering the State unable or unwilling to protect the victims and leaving them at risk of persecution; or in other situations where persecution risks linked to Convention grounds arise. Second, this encompasses refugees within wider regional definitions, including the OAU Convention and the Cartagena Declaration – including notably those compelled to leave their countries in the context of events or circumstances seriously disturbing public order related to climate change or disaster. Thirdly, under human rights law, people at risk of serious human rights violations linked to the effects of climate change and disaster may be recognized as needing international protection under non-refoulement obligations.

The risks of statelessness can increase when people move, including during displacement situations in the context of climate change and disasters. Statelessness may result where individuals are unable to prove their nationality due to loss of or inability to replace documentation, including in the context of disasters. People who are already stateless face specific and heightened risks because of pre-existing vulnerabilities and potential exclusion from protective measures and critical support services, such as climate mitigation measures, disaster relief or healthcare, that are only available to those who are citizens or who have a recognized legal status. In most cases, they have few or no means to prepare for, withstand and recover from climatic shocks and stresses.

Second, currently, 40 million refugees, returning refugees, internally displaced people (IDPs) and stateless people are living in 25 highly climate-vulnerable countries.

In many places, forcibly displaced, returning refugees, stateless people and the communities that host them have limited access to environmentally sustainable and climate-resilient services and resources such as water, food and energy. Without these services and support, these populations may face increased vulnerabilities and protection needs, in turn, resulting in harmful coping mechanisms and risky practices, including for women and girls, practices such as longer walks to fetch firewood and water. Such practices may also further degrade local ecosystems and habitats, through deforestation or water scarcity, compounding the impacts of climate change. Forcibly displaced, returned and stateless people, especially women and girls, are often disproportionately impacted when resources become scarce and require a doubling down of efforts to provide community-based protection and environmentally sustainable services.

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2 UN General Assembly, UNHCR Statute, Articles 8, 3 and 9.
The increased pressure in these areas on natural resources, especially land, forests and water, combined with increased frequency of climate shocks (such as droughts, floods, cyclones, heatwaves or other weather events) and gradual, slow-onset stresses (such as desertification, erosion, glacial melt and sea level rise) further reduce the capacities of these local communities to build their resilience and ensure their self-reliance. This situation is exacerbated by their limited access to national early warning and preparedness efforts, which limits their means to prepare for, withstand and recover from the impacts of climate change.

Livelihoods and social protection schemes need to transform quickly, as, without the means to prepare for, withstand, recover and adapt to increasing climate shocks and stresses, these communities and their hosts increasingly rely on short-term humanitarian assistance and systems for the provision of basic subsistence. Protection services need to be reinforced to ensure that all people, including women and girls, people with disabilities, and people in vulnerable situations, are able to not just cope with, but also thrive in the face of these challenges.

This situation is well-acknowledged by the global community as an urgent, critical issue. Yet, forcibly displaced and stateless people, along with their host communities, often fall through the cracks in terms of governments’ plans for climate change adaptation and sustainable development. While development and climate financing instruments and arrangements remain inadequate to address the huge challenges faced in climate-vulnerable developing countries, those in place offer an important opportunity to tackle these challenges in a way that is concerted, inclusive and necessary to ensure the most affected communities, including displaced people and their hosts, are not left behind.

Third, UNHCR’s organizational footprint contributes to global greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, which is the primary driver of climate change.

The organizational footprint is composed of a wide range of emissions, from the direct emissions of UNHCR’s operations and facilities to the indirect emissions from its supply chain practice. Therefore, it is important to identify, measure, analyse and reduce the emissions that are generated both internally and externally. In this context, the emergency response of UNHCR should minimize any harm while providing assistance and not further contribute to the climate crisis.

In 2022, UNHCR directly emitted a total of 52 kilotonnes of CO2, which was a decrease of 5 per cent from 2021. In addition to that, an estimated total of up to 450 kilotonnes of CO2 were emitted as part of its supply chain activities, which mainly include the purchase of core relief items and other goods, together with their storage and transportation. In 2021, the direct per capita carbon emissions of UNHCR were 3.0 tons per person, compared to a United Nations average of 4.1. Thus, UNHCR is already recognized as a leader amongst UN agencies, however, the organization is committed to doing much more to set a positive example in its own operations and to proactively develop models for sustainable clean energy transition to benefit the entire humanitarian development nexus.
2. Vision

The plan is centered on a long-term vision, to be achieved by UNHCR together with partners:

By 2030, increasing numbers of forcibly displaced and stateless people fleeing from climate-fueled crises, and/or living in climate vulnerable countries find solutions, are protected where needed, resilient to the impacts of climate change, and living self-sufficient lives.

This vision reaffirms UNHCR’s leadership in supporting States to ensure refugees, returnees, stateless and IDPs and their hosting communities impacted by the climate emergency, today and in the future, are protected and resilient to the effects of the changing climate, pursuant to its mandate. UNHCR will work together with sister UN agencies and the international community in advocating for and, when requested, providing operational assistance, to ensure that people displaced from and within countries in the context of climate change impacts can enjoy their basic rights.
### 3. What are the concrete changes that this plan will deliver?

In order to realize this vision, UNHCR has set **four objectives** to be achieved by the end of 2030, together with the support of a broad range of actors and partners:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1. People fleeing persecution, violence and human rights violations occurring in the context of climate change who need international protection are effectively protected³</th>
<th>2. Forcibly displaced, stateless and their hosts have increased access to services that promote the rights-based, sustainable use of natural resources and a clean and healthy environment</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3. Forcibly displaced, stateless, and their hosts have improved capacity and physical and economic means to prepare, withstand, recover and be protected from the impacts of climate change</td>
<td>4. UNHCR operates sustainably and systematically minimizes its negative impacts on the environment</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The four objectives describe the results that UNHCR will seek, together with its partners by 2030. These will be achieved through the strategic approach and concrete programming actions.

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³ This encompasses people who fall within the refugee definitions under the 1951 Convention and applicable regional instruments, including those displaced by events or circumstances seriously disturbing public order, or who are otherwise in need of international protection under human rights law and other relevant legal frameworks.
4. What is our programming approach and what are our priority actions?

Globally, pursuant to its mandate, UNHCR will reaffirm its position as the provider of guidance and expertise for the protection of displaced people in the context of climate change impacts.

Our priority actions build on our mandate and years of expertise. In line with UNHCR’s Statute and other relevant global and regional instruments, we will provide authoritative technical and legal guidance to member states and other stakeholders on addressing the protection needs of people displaced within their country or across borders in the context of climate change impacts.

Our operations will support the development of technical capacity of state institutions and other relevant entities to ensure that policy makers, the judiciary and the legal profession, among others, can provide and ensure respect for protection and develop policies in line with international human rights principles.

Noting that climate change impacts are driving displacement and human mobility more broadly, UNHCR will strengthen strategic partnerships with our sister agencies, human rights institutions; and other actors, so that we speak with amplified, harmonized voices on protection, human mobility, and climate change impacts. This includes UNHCR’s mobilization of support for the Global Compact for Refugees, our engagement in the Global Compact on Migration, in mixed movement situations and as a member of the Warsaw International Mechanism on Loss and Damage’s Taskforce on Displacement under the UNFCCC. We will complement our country-level action with global advocacy and external communication, data and evidence, and strategic alliances.
In countries where UNHCR has sufficient operational presence and resources where there are, or will be, forcibly displaced and stateless populations facing increased vulnerability and associated protection needs linked to the effects of climate change, UNHCR will focus on the following priority actions, which will be applied based on the context, and based on our role and accountabilities for refugees and IDPs.

Our priority actions build on our deep protection and multi-sectoral operational expertise; experience with working with humanitarian and development actors; roles and responsibilities in a country for refugees, returnees, stateless or IDPs; and knowledge of and collaboration with local communities. Multi-sectoral humanitarian assistance for refugees and IDPs will be strengthened to address the impacts of climate, including through integrated and area-based approaches based on needs.

Based on the context, we will focus on:

- reinforcing community engagement to preserve and rehabilitate the natural environment and mitigate protection risks, such as gender-based violence;
- ensuring that humanitarian, development and national actors strengthen the climate resilience and environmental sustainability of water, energy, shelter and housing, and waste management services;
- strengthening the capacity and willingness of governments to provide climate resilient social safety nets to the forcibly displaced and the communities which host them;
- enhancing access to climate-resilient and environmentally sustainable livelihood opportunities:
  - improving community access to early warning and preparedness systems; and
  - advocacy and technical support to the development of refugee and displacement-inclusive climate action and DRR policy and plans.

Further concrete steps have been identified to reduce the negative environmental footprint that is produced by the wide range of goods, activities, and services that the organization purchases and delivers through international and local markets. In particular, we will adapt the way we plan, programme and monitor our work to be in line with cross-cutting principles, so that we are operating in an environmentally sustainable and climate smart manner. The environmental principles encompass the way we plan, programme and monitor our work with our implementing partners; as well as the inputs and resources we use (such as supply items). They will be further developed with concrete measures, with regular reporting made available externally.
There are three different ways in which we will undertake these actions, based on context:

- **In countries where existing climate-adaptation and resilience programmes are established, we will leverage, shape and guide these towards delivering protection-centered environmentally sustainable services and climate-resilient programmes for the communities we serve.**
  
  We will work with governments, UN sister agencies and development partners to ensure the investments of development actors are inclusive of areas hosting displaced and stateless people, and that forcibly displaced, returned and stateless people are meaningfully included in climate resilience and adaptation policies, plans, and programmes. In doing so, we will enhance the capacity of refugee, returnee, IDP and stateless communities to protect their own environments, preserve their natural resources and create opportunities for forcibly displaced and stateless people to access climate-resilient livelihood opportunities.

- **In contexts where UNHCR has a comparative advantage and is well-placed to deliver multi-year climate projects in specific sectors in which it leads or already works, we will seek funding for multi-year climate adaptation or resilience projects.**
  
  In sectors such as water, renewable energy, shelter, livelihoods and waste management, UNHCR will employ its technical expertise and protection leadership to support national authorities and communities to design, implement and monitor these activities, and to articulate them in each operation’s Multi-Year Strategy.

- **In countries where significant populations of forcibly displaced, returned and stateless people are living at the absolute frontline of the climate crisis, UNHCR will address the impact of climate change on the protection needs and enjoyment of rights of forcibly displaced, returnee and stateless people and their hosts.**
  
  Today, there are at least 10 countries where, as part of the humanitarian response, climate has emerged as a main factor influencing forcibly displaced people’s ongoing protection and humanitarian needs, as food and water become scarcer, and drivers of conflict increase. In each of these contexts, there is very little investment from development and climate actors. In these situations, UNHCR will deploy two strategies. First, **UNHCR will firmly position humanitarian work as directly responding to the compounding impact of the climate crisis on people** who have already been displaced by persecution, violence, conflict, serious disturbance of public order or human rights violations. This advocacy effort, amplified by other humanitarian actors also working in these highly vulnerable contexts, is critical to ensure that the impact of climate change on forcibly displaced and stateless communities is part of the global policy debate. Second, the advocacy work will be accompanied by establishing a global climate fund for programming activities in the countries most affected. Existing UNHCR innovative financing instruments will be scaled up to also support these contexts.
As a UN agency, UNHCR will commit to measure and understand its environmental footprint and make strategic investments to mitigate the impact of its operations on the environment.

This change must happen at two levels – both from the ground up and centrally through strategic organization-wide initiatives. Ongoing and planned efforts by UNHCR to assess its overarching GHG emissions, include developing a standardized methodology to identify GHG reduction opportunities and track performance. The organization will prioritize making strategic investments in renewable energy to transition from its reliance on fossil fuels, particularly in remote locations that are not connected to a reliable electrical grid. It will also reduce the plastic content of its overall supply and the carbon footprint of travel and transport, engaging with its staff across the globe to raise awareness of its environmental impact and promote behaviour change at individual and organizational level through campaigns and policies.

5. Where will we focus?

Currently, UNHCR has identified 23 countries where future projections (up until 2030) indicate that they will be among the most climate vulnerable and will find it challenging to adapt to the effects of climate change; and where 52 per cent of IDPs, 28 per cent of refugees and 24 per cent of stateless people are currently located. Among these, UNHCR is concerned about 10 countries with large populations of displaced and stateless people where the climate emergency is most deeply felt and where there is very little development investment in adaptation and resilience. UNHCR will focus our global efforts to support initially these 23 countries during the first years of the strategic plan. These countries will be reviewed and adjusted on a regular basis as circumstances change.

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4 UNHCR, IDMC, OECD data for 2022 and ND-GAIN Index 2022, CGIAR projections to 2030
6. How will UNHCR monitor the plan and hold itself accountable?

The seven-year results framework of UNHCR will include a lean set of output level indicators, which can be used to showcase our impact (both in priority countries and globally). We will further explore how we integrate climate resilience into our current Global Results Framework to reflect the prioritization of this area for delivery on our mandated responsibilities and as a strategic area for enterprise risk management.

UNHCR has set ambitious targets to hold itself accountable in delivering the objectives and realizing the desired changes at a global level. UNHCR will carry out a mid-term review of the progress and achievements. This will allow the plan to be adjusted and adapted as necessary.

7. Budget

Referencing UNHCR’s operations globally, currently the estimated requirements are around $1 billion for activities contributing to climate resilience, adaptation and environmental sustainability in 2024.

33-year-old Hajira Abdullaji at a water tap stand located a few meters from her shelter. UNHCR and partners continue to provide access to clean water to newly arrived refugees in Kenya, most of whom have escaped biting drought in Somalia.
Theory of Change for Climate Action

By 2030, increasing numbers of forcibly displaced and stateless people fleeing from climate-fueled crises and/or living in climate-vulnerable countries find solutions, are protected and resilient to the impacts of climate change, and are living self-sufficient lives.

1. People fleeing persecution, violence and human rights violations occurring in the context of climate change who need international protection are effectively protected
   - States and others’ understanding of protection entitlements
   - States and others’ technical capacity to respond to asylum claims
   - States’ commitment to protection

2. Forcibly displaced, stateless and their hosts have increased access to services that promote the rights-based, sustainable use of natural resources and a clean and healthy environment
   - Community engagement to preserve and rehabilitate the environment and mitigate protection risks
   - Increasingly sustainable water services
   - Renewable, cleaner energy
   - Waste management and sanitation services

3. Forcibly displaced, stateless, and their hosts have improved physical and economic means to prepare, withstand, recover and be protected from the impacts of climate change
   - Protection services
   - Sustainable, climate-resilient settlement, shelter and housing
   - Improved shock-responsive, climate adaptive social protection and humanitarian cash assistance
   - Climate-resilient and environmentally sustainable livelihoods
   - Early warning systems and preparedness measures

4. UNHCR operates sustainably with systems in place to minimize negative impacts on the environment
   - Sustainable supply
   - Sustainable fleet, travel and infrastructure

**Vision**

- Global thought leadership and advocacy on protection, solutions and inclusion
- Strategic partnerships and alliances
- Leveraging for inclusion of displaced and stateless people in others’ climate adaptation and resilience programmes
- Implementing multi-year climate projects in priority programming areas we lead
- Delivering our humanitarian action to immediately support climate resilience and adaptation

**Key advocacy asks on inclusion**

1. Governments and municipalities to include displaced and stateless people and their hosting areas, as well as areas of potential return, in climate-related plans and policies without discrimination (including adaptation, DRR, development, early warning, incl. for health surveillance and response systems), and to ensure plans and strategies are protection-sensitive and respect do-not-harm principles

2. Development actors and international financial institutions to include displaced people and their hosting areas, as well as areas of potential return and reintegration, in their plans, policies and financing

3. States and municipalities to commit to out-of-camp solutions, freedom of movement, and provisions for secure housing, land and property arrangements for displaced people in non-hazardous, risk-mitigated and economically viable areas

**Outputs delivered in accordance with IASC-mandated responsibilities in situations of internal displacement**

**Adaptation and Resilience**

**Mitigation**

- Improved data and evidence
- New processes and systems
- Culture change
- Strengthened skills and knowledge
- New fundraising and innovative financing

**Assumptions**

- Hosting states are sufficiently supported by the international community to share the responsibility for hosting more displaced people
- Development actors meet their commitments to equity in reaching the most vulnerable, especially in their adaptation and resilience portfolios
- Climate financing can be secured for fragile non development settings
- UNHCR maintains and increases its funding and capacities to make the strategic shifts to deliver the plan
Cover photo:
IKEA and UNHCR providing refugees in Ethiopia with training on energy and agriculture to help improve refugee self-reliance and build a more cohesive society for both refugees and host community members in the region.
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