



Tents for Congolese refugees in Kigeme camp are pitched side-to-side in a steep hill in Rwanda, 2012.

Policy Formulation On Planned Relocation

Compared to “evacuation”, there has been insufficient discussion on “planned relocation” as a DRR strategy. Evacuation is not preventive and may not be sufficient in cases where people need to be relocated out of high risks areas or cannot return to the place of original residence, when such areas are repeatedly stricken by disasters. Thus, governments will increasingly need to consider relocating communities to safer areas from a long-term perspective.

UNHCR has extensive experience with finding durable solutions for refugees through resettlement to new countries, local integration in countries of asylum and reintegration after voluntary repatriation to the country of origin. Drawing upon this experience, UNHCR is working with the Brookings Institution and Georgetown University to develop guidance for States and supporting actors to undertake relocation in a manner that respects the humanity, dignity and the human rights of affected populations.

THE WAY FORWARD

- Refugees, asylum-seekers, and other persons of concern should be included in national DRR planning and response mechanisms
- Governments and other relevant organizations should cooperate with UNHCR to minimize the risks posed by natural hazards by selecting the least disaster-prone site for refugee settlement.
- UNHCR will work with Governments and relevant organizations to collect data on disasters associated with natural hazards affecting refugees and other people it cares for.
- UNHCR will support Government and relevant organizations by developing guidance to inform national policies and legislation on planned relocation as a DRR strategy.
- UNHCR will develop an institutional policy and build staff capacity on DRR.

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UNHCR, Displacement and Disaster Risk Reduction

Photo: 78,000 refugees in Dadaab camp in Kenya were affected by the flooding in 2011. UNHCR/B.Bannon

For more information:

- UNHCR’s Global Strategy for Safe Access to Fuel and Energy (2014-2018): <http://www.unhcr.org/530f11ee6.html>
- UNHCR Environment and Climate Change Overview (2014): <http://www.unhcr.org/540854f49.html>
- Planned Relocation, Disasters and Climate Change: Consolidating Good Practices and Preparing for the Future. Background document from Consultation co-organized by UNHCR, Brookings Institute and Georgetown University (2014): <http://www.unhcr.org/53c4d6f99.pdf>
- UNHCR Global Strategy for Settlement and Shelter (2014-2018): <http://www.unhcr.org/530f13aa9.pdf>



The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) is mandated by the UN General Assembly to lead and co-ordinate international action to protect refugees and resolve refugee problems worldwide. By virtue of its mandate, UNHCR is the leading protection organization for refugees and stateless people, while also playing an important role in the protection of Internally displaced persons.

UNHCR’s Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) activities include actions aimed at enhancing the environmental resilience of refugees and Internally displaced persons and supporting emergency responses.

THE IMPORTANCE OF DRR FOR UNHCR

DRR is important for UNHCR in three major ways.

- **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 exacerbate social tensions and act as an accelerator of armed 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.**
- **UNHCR has extensive knowledge and experience with responding to large movements of refugees and internally displaced persons. UNHCR has used this expertise to support governments and other UN agencies on protection of persons displaced by disasters, as well as by conducting research aimed at informing policies to better protect displaced populations.**

Vulnerability of Refugees and Other Displaced Persons

A UNHCR survey in 2015 found refugees and internally displaced persons were exposed to 150 disasters in sixteen countries during 2013 and 2014, confirming their vulnerability to disasters associated with natural hazards. Floods, landslides, severe storms, fires and other disasters affected some 380,000.



Nahima, 28 years old and her friends carry firewood for cooking. She is a refugee from Sudan. They have to walk 5 km out of their refugee camp to gather wood. UNHCR/S.Rich / Feb. 2013

The survey suggests that refugees living in camp settings are much more likely to be displaced by disasters than the general population in the world. Out of 3.2 million refugees residing in camp settings, as many as 200,000 were affected by disasters associated with natural hazards and 100,000 were displaced in 2014 alone. 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. For example, in July 2014, 47,000 refugees in Leitchuor camp in Ethiopia were cut off from the world for more than one month due to a flood that ruined the main access road to the camp. UNHCR staff had to travel by air and humanitarian items had to be transported by boat, all at very high cost.

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, etc.) or tents, which can have a lifespan as short as several months.

Disaster and Conflict

Natural hazards such as droughts can intensify competition among various populations over firewood, water and grazing land. Disasters can cause displacement directly but also indirectly by exacerbating underlying social tensions and conflicts.

For example, the major outflows of Somali refugees to camps in Kenya and Ethiopia during 2011 and 2012 were caused by the combination of drought and the disruption caused by armed groups. "Because farms became too dry to cultivate and many livestock perished, the frequency and intensity of raids of villages by armed groups increased. They took away the little food left. That is why I had to come to Kenya" said a pastoralist from Somalia in Hagadera Camp, Kenya.

UNHCR DRR ACTIVITIES

Resilience

UNHCR's *Global Strategy for Safe Access to Fuel and Energy (SAFE) 2014-2018*, contributes to building the resilience of refugee communities by strengthening their capacity to manage natural resources. For 2015, UNHCR supports a range of environment resilience projects, including reforestation, promotion of fuel-efficient cook stoves and environmental awareness campaigns.

Building environmental resilience enhances the protection of refugees and improves relations with host communities. According to a UNHCR survey, the vast majority of refugees in the camps in Chad, Ethiopia, Kenya, and Uganda, rely on wood for cooking. They spend an average of 31 hours a month on firewood collection. Thirty percent of these refugees reported coming into a conflict with the host community, as a result of these activities.

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



In September 2014, a flash flood swept through Kakuma refugee camp in Kenya, destroying 50 shelters and leaving hundreds of people displaced. Leonie Ndayishimiye, a 27-year-old Burundian refugee, lost her husband in the flood. "I do not know where to begin. He was all we had", she says, now being left to care for four young children.

is conducting extensive research on alternative shelter solutions to provide safe and dignified homes for persons of concern.

Emergency Response

In large-scale natural disaster situations leading to significant displacement, UNHCR may, within the UN interagency framework, and with the consent of the affected country, provide expertise in protection, shelter, and camp management and coordination. UNHCR has played a role in protection and shelter coordination during the response to the earthquake in Haiti in 2010, the droughts in Somalia from 2011 to 2012, floods in Pakistan in 2010 and 2012, storms and flooding in Myanmar in 2013, typhoons in the Philippines in 2011 and 2013, the floods and landslides in Afghanistan in 2014 and floods in Malawi and Mozambique in 2015.

UNHCR supports emergency response capacity of government officials in countries like Afghanistan, Yemen, and Somalia.