



# UNHCR and Environmental Change

Protection, Mitigation,  
Adaptation

**Climate change and natural disasters exacerbate the vulnerability of persons of concern to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) (asylum-seekers, refugees, returnees, stateless persons and internally displaced persons).**

The increase in the average global surface temperature is linked to an increase in extreme weather events, such as floods, cyclones and severe storms and slow onset disasters like drought, desertification, sea-level rise and glacial melt.

These events impact UNHCR's persons of concern across multiple sectors: water, sanitation, health, hygiene, agriculture, food security, shelter, camp management, environment, transport and communications. This calls for innovative approaches, sustainable solutions and creative funding for **protection, mitigation and adaptation.**

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**Climate Change: Why does UNHCR care?**  
**Protection, Mitigation and Adaptation**  
are three ways UNHCR is preparing for and alleviating the negative impacts of climate change on its persons of concern.



**Photo Captions and Credits:**

Front Cover: Flood-affected people in the  
Badin District of Sindh (Pakistan, 2011) UNHCR/ S. Phelps  
P3: Internally displaced women and children wait in line to collect UNHCR supplies  
at the Kabara transit camp. (Somalia, 2011) UNHCR/ S. Modola  
P4: Nursery, Fugnido (Ethiopia, 2010) UNHCR/ A.Gebre  
P5: A refugee builds a trench around his shelter to prevent flooding  
during heavy rains (Benin, 2005) UNHCR/ J. Björqvinnson  
Back Cover: Somali refugees in IFO extension camp (Kenya, 2011). UNHCR/ B. Banson

 **UNHCR**  
The UN Refugee Agency





## Protection

**Migration and displacement are traditional ways to respond to crises, such as conflict and persecution. Global warming leading to extreme weather events like drought and floods is triggering more human mobility.**

Most human mobility due to climate change is projected to occur within national borders. The Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement recognize that displaced persons are entitled to human rights within their countries, including protection against arbitrary or forced displacement.

However, people who are displaced across borders solely for environmental reasons would not normally enjoy protection as refugees under the 1951 Refugee Convention.

Norway, Switzerland, UNHCR and the Norwegian Refugee Council therefore launched the 'Nansen Initiative' to address the protection gap for people displaced across borders owing to environmental change and extreme weather.

## Mitigation

**In its submission to RIO+20, UNHCR pledged to make sound environmental management an integral part of its operations, to limit the environmental impact of its activities and to reduce its carbon footprint.**

UNHCR's climate change mitigation goals are met by promoting energy efficiency and renewable energies in camps and through reforestation. UNHCR and partners in various countries have been supporting domestic energy initiatives in refugee operations. In 2011, UNHCR launched the *Light Years Ahead* campaign. With private donations of 1.6 million USD, UNHCR installed 200 solar street lights, distributed 15,000 solar lanterns and provided 8,300 refugee women with fuel-efficient stoves.

Aside from reducing CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, these types of measures help the lives of refugees by minimizing protection risks such as sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), limiting health effects of indoor air pollution and conserving precious natural resources, which mitigates conflicts.

Forest rehabilitation and green spaces continue to contribute to mitigation. Over 28 million trees were planted in and around refugee camps in Africa since 2007. Forestry is an essential resource, providing fuel and shelter materials, as well as income-generating opportunities.

## Adaptation

**Adaptation measures are increasingly developed by refugees and host communities themselves, as they struggle to cope with changes to their environment.**

No amount of mitigation will reverse climate change; the challenge now is to adapt to the changing circumstances.

The climate change debate has thus moved from an exclusive focus on mitigation (reducing CO<sub>2</sub> emissions) to encompass climate change adaptation and disaster risk reduction (CCA/DRR).

UNHCR is developing a strategy to mainstream CCA/DRR into its refugee and IDP operations. This requires working with host countries on their National Adaptation Programmes of Action (NAPAs) and with refugee and host communities on climate-proofing water, sanitation, shelter and other operational activities.

Examples of adaptation measures are drip irrigation and rainwater harvesting in drought-prone areas and canals and dykes to prevent floods.