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Climate crises disproportionately affect communities that may already be vulnerable, many of which are located in 'hotspots' of climatic change and often lack the means to cope with an increasingly hostile environment. Depletion of natural resources which are used for subsistence or income generation may lead to antagonism between different communities and often exacerbate pre-existing tensions across communal identity lines, leading to violent conflict. This creates a complex and dynamic interplay between climate change and other root causes of displacement.

Indeed, over 70% of refugees and displaced people worldwide come from the most climate-vulnerable countries, including Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Syria and Yemen.61 Climate-induced displacement often takes place within countries but also causes displaced populations to cross borders in pursuit of a liveable environment. Such cross-border mobility places the issue of providing protection into an international context.

In 2022, millions of people were forced to flee their homes due to drought and the threat of famine in Somalia, drought in Central America's "Dry Corridor", cyclones in Mozambique, hurricanes in Honduras, and floods in Afghanistan, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chad, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Pakistan, South Sudan and Sudan.62

Acknowledging climate change as a real and existing challenge, as well as its role in shaping protection needs worldwide, the international community has intensified efforts over the past years to develop effective responses. Through the Strategic Framework for Climate Action, UNHCR works together with affected communities, host governments, UN country teams, international organisations, financial institutions, the private sector and academia to increase resilience among displaced populations in the face of climate change.63

In March 2022, the UN Human Rights Council appointed the first Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights in the context of climate change. The rapporteur's overall mandate is to contribute towards ongoing efforts to address the adverse impact of climate change on the enjoyment of human rights, including people displaced by climate-related reasons.64 A challenge in providing protection solutions to these populations is that no legal definition exists for persons displaced due to environmental reasons and, derivatively, what the criteria are for one to qualify.

In November 2022, the 27th UN Climate Change Conference of Parties (COP27) highlighted the need to include refugees and displaced persons from the most climate-vulnerable countries in the debate. Refugees and displaced persons from countries affected by climate-induced displacement addressed the audience for the first time in the history of the conference, warning that current attempts to adapt to the changing environment were outpaced by the speed of climate change.65 As highlighted by UNHCR, there is a need to scale-up financing for the countries at the frontlines of climate emergencies, but also to ensure that resources reach not only climate-vulnerable countries but displaced people and host communities as well.66

- 61United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. (2022, November 7). UNHCR's Grandi urges world leaders not to forget displaced people at COP27. https://www.unhcr.org/news/press/2022/11/636814a04/unhcrs-grandi-urges-world-leaders-forget-displaced-people-cop27.html
- 62United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. (2022, November 7). UNHCR's Grandi urges world leaders not to forget displaced people at COP27. https://www.unhcr.org/news/press/2022/11/636814a04/unhcrs-grandi-urges-world-leaders-forget-displaced-people-cop27.html
- 63United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (2020). Strategic Framework for Climate Action. https://www.unhcr.org/604a26d84/strategic-framework-for-climate-action
- 64Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. (2022, June 23). “Intolerable tide” of people displaced by climate change: UN expert. https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2022/06/intolerable-tide-people-displaced-climate-change-un-expert
- 65United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. (2022, November 18). UNHCR: Refugees and displaced people need seats at COP28 table. https://www.unhcr.org/news/briefing/2022/11/637746ec315/unhcr-refugees-displaced-people-need-seats-cop28-table.html
- 66United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. (2022, November 18). UNHCR: Refugees and displaced people need seats at COP28 table. https://www.unhcr.org/news/briefing/2022/11/637746ec315/unhcr-refugees-displaced-people-need-seats-cop28-table.html

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