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Climate change is increasingly reported to have a growing and disproportionate impact on the most vulnerable communities, with climate-induced displacement being one of the direst consequences. In addition, climate change may exacerbate living conditions for populations that have been already displaced, as many of them live in 'climate hotspots' and commonly lack the resources to adapt to an increasingly adverse environment.37 This type of displacement commonly takes place within countries, but in some cases displaced populations cross borders in pursuit of a liveable environment, placing the issue of protection into an international context.

A fundamental challenge in identifying specific solutions is that no legal definition exists for persons displaced due to environmental reasons and, derivatively, what the criteria are for one to qualify. To guide interpretation and inform international discussions on the topic, in 2020 UNHCR issued a set of legal considerations on claims for international protection made in the context of the adverse effects of climate change and disasters.38

International efforts to improve protection for people displaced across borders, albeit not new, have intensified over the past years. The Platform on Disaster Displacement brings together a number of national governments and international organisations to offer better protection for people who are displaced into another country in the context of disasters and climate change. Through the platform, policymakers, researchers and practitioners have built partnerships to discuss developments, share information and create policies and toolboxes to prevent and respond to situations of climate-induced displacement.39

UNHCR has been coordinating efforts to develop effective responses to the growing climate emergency. To this end, the Strategic Framework for Climate Action provides a roadmap for action, in collaboration with affected communities, host governments, UN country teams, NGOs, international organisations, international and regional financial institutions, the private sector and academia. Under the framework, work is carried out on guiding the interpretation and application of legal and policy frameworks, developing relevant guidance; preserving and rehabilitating the natural environment, enhancing the resilience of displaced populations and host communities in the face of climate-related risks, strengthening preparedness and responses, and improving the environmental sustainability of UNHCR’s operations.40

In October-November 2021, the 26th UN Climate Change Conference of the Parties (COP26) took place to accelerate action towards the goals of the Paris Agreement and the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change. In light of the conference, UNHCR called participating leaders to step up support to people forced to flee due to climate-related emergencies, as well as their host communities to avert and mitigate damage on the most vulnerable regions.41 Suggested actions included increasing financial, technological and capacity support to address climate-induced displacement, reducing greenhouse emissions, providing support to displaced populations and host communities by scaling up prevention and preparedness measures, and including displaced voices in climate research, adaptation and mitigation efforts.42

- 37United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. (2022, May 3). Climate change and disaster displacement. https://www.unhcr.org/climate-change-and-disasters.html
- 38United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (2020). Legal considerations regarding claims for international protection made in the context of the adverse effects of climate change and disasters. https://www.refworld.org/docid/5f75f2734.html
- 39United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. (2022, May 3). Climate change and disaster displacement. https://www.unhcr.org/climate-change-and-disasters.html
- 40United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (2020). Strategic Framework for Climate Action. https://www.unhcr.org/604a26d84/strategic-framework-for-climate-action
- 41United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. (2021, November 7). UNHCR: Urgent steps needed now to mitigate climate impact on displaced people. https://www.unhcr.org/news/press/2021/11/618561b24/unhcr-urgent-steps-needed-mitigate-climate-impact-displaced-people
- 42United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. (2021, November 7). UNHCR: Urgent steps needed now to mitigate climate impact on displaced people. https://www.unhcr.org/news/press/2021/11/618561b24/unhcr-urgent-steps-needed-mitigate-climate-impact-displaced-people

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