UNHCR The UN Refugee Agency

PIK POTSDAM INSTITUTE FOR CLIMATE IMPACT RESEARCH

COVID-19, Displacement and Climate Change
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COVID-19 presents unique risks to displaced people, who are often living in densely populated settlements where communicable diseases can spread quickly.

Climate change makes the chance of disasters striking during the COVID-19 pandemic more likely, and their impact more severe on those displaced.

COVID-19 increases vulnerability for populations living in regions especially impacted by the adverse effects of climate change.

COVID-19 AND THE CLIMATE EMERGENCY

COVID-19 and climate change both cause global disruption that transcends borders and threatens the lives of millions of people.

COVID-19 and climate change are risk multipliers that exacerbate inequalities by disproportionately affecting the most vulnerable, each in its own way.

COVID-19 and climate change pose health threats of global magnitude. The World Health Organization estimates that between 2030 and 2050, climate change will cause approximately 250,000 additional deaths per year from malnutrition, malaria, and heat stress. Climate change and loss of biodiversity also increase the risk of future pandemics by endangering the fragility of the world´s ecosystems. [1]

1. https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/climate-change-and-health

COVID-19 AND DISASTER DISPLACEMENT

In 2019, nearly 2,000 disasters triggered 24.9 million new displacements.[2] Disaster threats are currently high across much of the globe, with record cyclones, floods, droughts and the biggest locust outbreak in generations expected in Asia and Africa.

In 2020, disaster displacement will occur in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic constraining the response capacity including emergency evacuation as shelter centres hosting large groups could present a catastrophic health risk.

COVID-19 only increases the challenge of protecting the most vulnerable. People unable to leave areas affected by climate disasters because of COVID-19 lockdowns can become trapped in dangerous situations.

2. IDMC Global Report on Internal Displacement 2020

COMPOUND RISKS OF COVID-19 AND CLIMATE CHANGE FOR DISPLACED PEOPLE

- **One-third** of the world's internally displaced **live in the 10 countries most at-risk to COVID-19.** They now face **three crises rolled into one**, a health crisis, a socio-economic crisis, a protection crisis, against the backdrop of an ever-growing climate crisis. [3]

- COVID-19 adds an **additional layer of vulnerability to displaced persons in environmentally fragile areas** and regions heavily impacted by the effects of climate change, which are often further impacted by poverty, conflict, weak health systems.

- Those who are **displaced suddenly in the contexts of disasters will face enhanced health risks** where it may not be possible to respect hygiene and social distancing measures.

- Displaced populations often have **precarious livelihoods, reduced or no access to social safety nets and health services**. These vulnerabilities are **exacerbated for those in "climate hotspots"**, or where livelihoods are already at risk due to climate change and environmental degradation.

- **Humanitarian access** during the pandemic will remain constrained and the forcibly displaced and other vulnerable populations will be **hit the hardest** by the crisis.

3. UN Secretary General Policy Brief COVID-19 and People on the Move, June 2020

Lessons from COVID-19 response applicable to Climate Action

"The coronavirus outbreak has shown that in order to avert the worst impacts of a global crisis, the international community needs to come together quickly to make bold change. The current crisis has offered many learning points so as to address the climate emergency with new ambition and seriousness."
Andrew Harper, UNHCR´s Special Advisor on Climate Action

We need to anticipate rather than react

In climate change as in pandemics, early mitigative action is the only option to prevent unmanageable crises. Economically, prevention is also the most cost-effective choice. It entails risk mitigation and the development of preparedness systems since both climate risks and pandemics can be anticipated. Early containment of a disease outbreak can save lives that cannot be protected later on through reactive measures. On a larger scale, avoiding large nonlinear changes in the earth system, like the collapse of the West Antarctic ice sheet, by cutting emissions, will guard humanity against catastrophic damages. Emergency preparedness, mitigation and climate adaptation should take into consideration what happens after disasters hit, the costs of responding to emergencies, rebuilding, and loss of life. Achieving the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals and ensuring a healthy environment would help prevent pandemics, mitigate the adverse effects of climate change, eliminate drivers of displacement and protect human rights.

We can make drastic changes quickly and invest in a greener future

In response to COVID-19, countries have reacted swiftly and colossal emergency funds were released. The global response shows that States can take immediate, radical emergency measures to protect the well-being of all. Similar dedication for climate change could accelerate the transition to clean and sustainable energy and reduce our greenhouse gas emissions. In line with the UN Secretary General´s six climate-related actions to shape the post-pandemic recovery, States have a unique opportunity to "build back better" by creating more sustainable, climate-resilient and inclusive societies and avoiding path-dependencies in sectors like transportation and energy.

The key to a successful response is to protect everyone

COVID-19 spreads indiscriminately, but certain groups are disproportionately impacted. These include displaced persons and stateless persons, and those already marginalized by structural barriers and underlying social, economic or physical vulnerabilities. They are often the same groups that carry the brunt of the burden from climate change, while having contributed little to the emergence of the problem. In line with the principles of burden- and responsibility-sharing set out in the Global Compact on Refugees, UNHCR is working closely with governments and partners to promote the inclusion of refugees, to provide guidance on international protection frameworks for people displaced in the context of climate change and disasters including where these interact with COVID-19, and to cooperate with its scientific partners to improve preparedness and response measures. The lessons learned around global cooperation and the importance of inclusion and protection of vulnerable groups during the pandemic must be applied to urgent global efforts on climate action.

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