Climate Crisis: Basic Information About the Climate Crisis

WHAT IS CLIMATE CHANGE?

Climate change, as defined by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), refers to "**long-term shifts in temperatures and weather patterns**". While Earth's climate has always experienced natural variations, the current changes are primarily driven by human activities. Burning fossil fuels (such as coal, oil, and gas) releases large amounts of greenhouse gases, particularly carbon dioxide, into the atmosphere. These gases trap heat, causing global temperatures to rise—a process commonly known as global warming.

This warming shifts weather patterns across the globe, influencing rainfall, drought cycles, storms, and sea levels. Although events like floods, droughts, storms, and heatwaves have always happened naturally, climate change intensifies their severity, frequency, and unpredictability. Natural climate cycles such as El Niño and La Niña—periodic warming or cooling of ocean waters—already affect weather worldwide, but **human-driven climate change amplifies and complicates these effects**.

Because **past weather patterns no longer reliably predict future conditions**, humanitarian planning increasingly depends on climate science. Reliable forecasts and scenarios enable humanitarian organizations to prepare proactively, allocate resources more effectively, and reduce the impacts of climate-related disasters on vulnerable communities.

For detailed definitions and clarifications of key terms, please refer to the ***Glossary of Climate Terms for Cluster Coordinators.***

WHY IS THERE A CLIMATE CRISIS

Climate hazards such as floods, droughts, storms, heatwaves, and coastal flooding have always existed, and humanitarian actors have responded to disasters caused by these hazards for decades. However, the **scale, severity, and unpredictability** of these hazards have dramatically intensified since 2010 due to human-driven climate change.

Scientists have warned about climate change impacts since the late 1980s, and global frameworks such as the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (1992) demonstrate a longstanding awareness of this growing threat. Yet recent years have shown a stark escalation in humanitarian consequences:

- **Storms** have become more destructive (e.g., Cyclone Idai in 2019, Typhoon Haiyan in 2013).
- **Droughts** have become deeper and more prolonged (e.g., East Africa since 2010).
- **Heatwaves** have grown more intense and deadly (e.g., record-breaking events in India and Pakistan).
- **Coastal flooding** linked to rising sea levels has significantly accelerated (e.g., Bangladesh and Pacific islands).

These intensified climate hazards are now compounding other humanitarian crises such as conflict, displacement, and poverty, creating complex emergencies beyond the capacity of traditional humanitarian responses. Without urgent global action, scientific evidence clearly indicates the situation will continue to deteriorate, further exacerbating humanitarian needs worldwide.

We now explicitly refer to this situation as a **"climate crisis"** because:

- Climate hazards occur more frequently, with greater severity, overwhelming existing humanitarian response systems.
- Vulnerable communities already dealing with poverty, conflict, or displacement face additional compounded risks from these intensified climate events – and they are far more severely and frequently affected by climate hazards and their consequences due to lack of their resilience to such events.

- Existing humanitarian resources, funding mechanisms, and planning cycles are not structured to adequately manage these escalating impacts proactively.

In short, the crisis is not defined by the existence of climate hazards alone, but rather by the rapid escalation of their humanitarian impacts and our current inability to anticipate, prepare for, and manage them effectively using existing frameworks.

For operational guidance, see the ***Guidance on Climate Crisis and Humanitarian Coordination.***

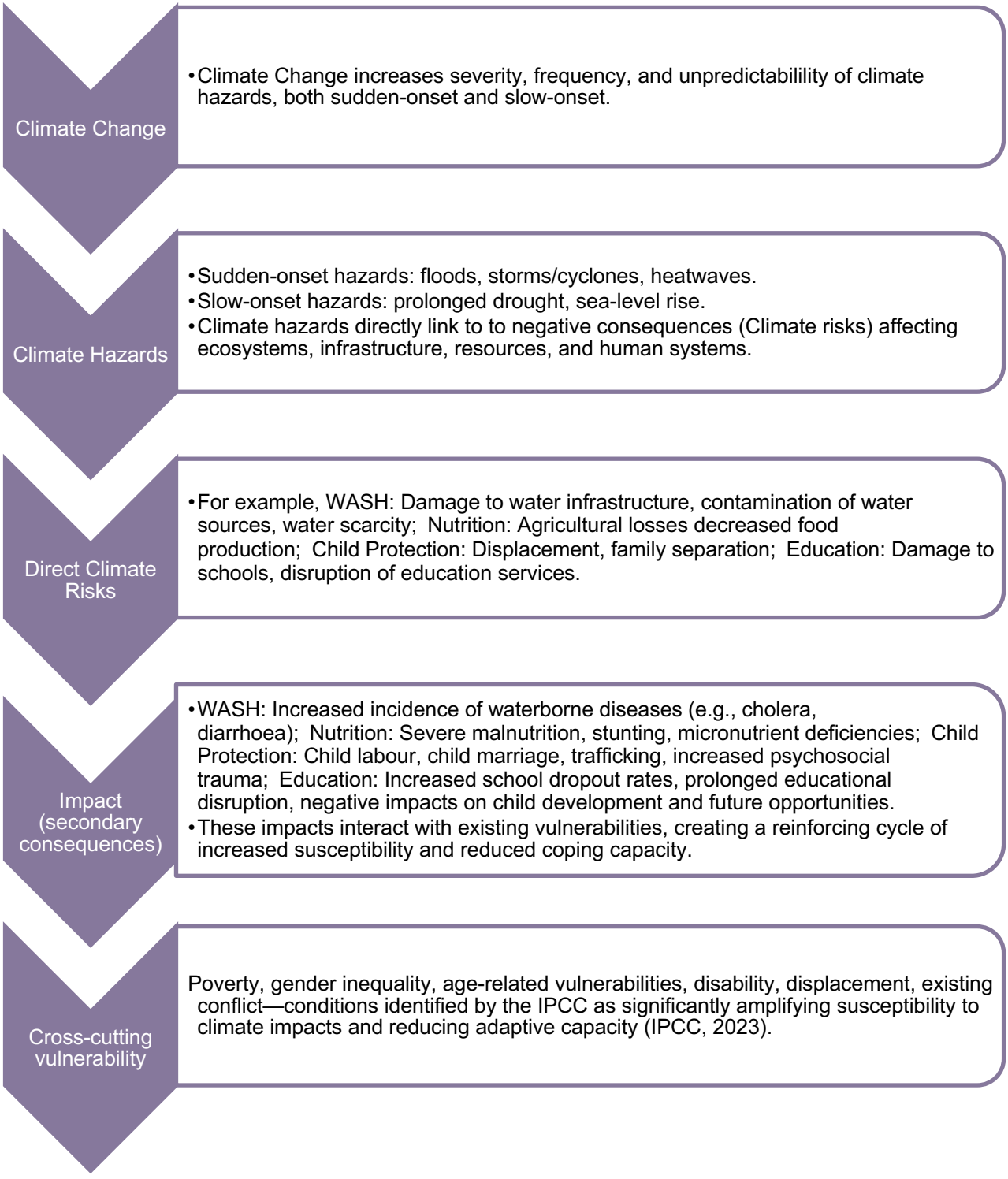
HOW CLIMATE HAZARDS CREATE ADDITIONAL RISKS FOR HUMANITARIAN POPULATIONS

Climate hazards have always had a greater impact on people who are already struggling with poverty, conflict, displacement, gender inequality, or vulnerabilities due to age and disability. Climate change is now making these inequalities worse by causing more frequent, severe, and unpredictable extreme weather events. This worsens existing vulnerabilities and brings new humanitarian challenges, while also adding burden on the logistics of the humanitarian delivery capacity and increasing its cost.

These increased hazards have serious humanitarian consequences, especially in areas already facing crises. They lead to more displacement, worsen food insecurity, and spark conflicts over limited resources. Slow-onset changes—like desertification from prolonged drought and rising sea levels—also disrupt livelihoods, forcing people to migrate and engage in negative coping mechanisms, which result in worsening of existing vulnerabilities. Such negative coping mechanisms are highly likely to result in the violation of children's rights, such as increased number of child marriage, family separation and poorer access to education, as well as other life-threatening risks such as food insecurity.

Impacts vary widely depending on local and regional conditions. Some areas face increased flooding, storms, or cyclones, while others experience prolonged droughts or extreme heat. Humanitarian responses must therefore be specifically tailored to manage these distinct and intensified risks effectively.

Given the growing unpredictability, humanitarian coordination groups/platforms must prioritize proactive planning by systematically using climate forecasts and other climate-related information in their work, such as needs assessments and planning (HNO/HRPs, contingency planning, and others), to reduce the humanitarian impacts of climate hazards.



SECTOR-SPECIFIC IMPACTS OF KEY CLIMATE HAZARDS

The following table illustrates how key climate hazards—drought, floods, heatwaves, and storms/cyclones—specifically impact different humanitarian sectors (Child Protection, Education, Nutrition, and Water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH)). Understanding these distinct impacts helps humanitarian actors anticipate, and plan targeted, effective responses. Because each hazard affects sectors differently, this structured overview highlights key risks, guiding preparedness, resource allocation, and tailored responses.

For more detailed information of the impact of climate change, please see IMC (2023) Evidence Report: Impact of Climate Change, and for detailed sector-specific guidance and further information on how to practically address these climate-driven impacts, please refer to the sector-specific guidance.

Climate Hazard	Child Protection	Education	Nutrition	Water, Sanitation, Hygiene (WASH)
Drought	Increased economic stress driving displacement, family separation, child labour, child marriage, and school withdrawal.	Increased economic stress and displacement risks, causing reduced school attendance and dropout, disproportionately impacting girls and children with disabilities.	Severe reduction in agricultural productivity, causing food insecurity, acute malnutrition, stunting, and micronutrient deficiencies—particularly among children, pregnant/lactating women, and people with disabilities.	Severe shortage of safe drinking water, forcing reliance on unsafe sources, increasing risks of waterborne diseases such as cholera and diarrhoea, especially affecting young children, older people, and those with disabilities.
Floods	Displacement causing increased family separation, exploitation, trafficking, abuse, and psychosocial vulnerabilities, particularly affecting children with disabilities.	Severe damage to schools and infrastructure causing prolonged closures and education disruption, especially affecting displaced children, girls, and children with disabilities.	Destruction of crops and disruption of markets, reducing availability of nutritious foods, increasing acute malnutrition especially among vulnerable groups.	Contamination of drinking water sources leading to heightened risks of waterborne diseases, severely affecting vulnerable populations including young children, older people, and people with disabilities.
Heatwaves	Increased risks of psychosocial stress and harm due to economic hardship and displacement pressures	Negative health impacts affecting school attendance and learning, particularly in schools without	Reduced agricultural productivity and livestock health, intensifying food insecurity and malnutrition	Extreme heat placing additional stress on water resources and hygiene practices, particularly

	affecting family stability and safety, particularly among vulnerable children.	infrastructure to manage high temperatures, affecting girls and children with disabilities disproportionately .	among young children, pregnant women, and people with disabilities.	impacting vulnerable populations such as young children, older people, and people with disabilities.
Storms/ Cyclones	Displacement significantly increasing family separation, psychosocial distress, exploitation, trafficking, and barriers in evacuating safely, especially affecting children with disabilities.	Severe physical destruction of schools and prolonged disruption of education. Long-term displacement further undermines continuous education, particularly impacting girls, displaced children, and children with disabilities.	Damage to crops, livestock, and local markets sharply increasing food insecurity and acute malnutrition risks, particularly among children, pregnant women, and people with disabilities.	Damage to water supply systems and sanitation infrastructure leading to contamination of drinking water and increased disease risks, severely affecting vulnerable groups like young children, older people, and people with disabilities.

KEY FRAMEWORKS GUIDING HUMANITARIAN ACTION

The humanitarian sector's response to the climate crisis is guided by two foundational documents. Together, these frameworks establish a shared understanding and outline key commitments, although detailed guidance on systematically integrating climate risks into humanitarian operations is still evolving.

Climate and Environment Charter for Humanitarian Organizations *(2021)*
The Charter emerged from recognition by humanitarian agencies—including IFRC, Red Cross, UN agencies, and NGOs—of the urgent need to proactively address climate and environmental risks. Over 400 humanitarian organizations have committed to scaling up climate action, improving environmental sustainability, and prioritizing support to vulnerable populations facing intensified climate impacts.

IASC Climate Crisis Roadmap *(2024)*
Developed by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC), this Roadmap provides practical guidance on operationalizing the Climate Charter commitments at the country level. It prioritizes anticipatory planning, proactive risk management, resilience-building, and enhanced coordination across humanitarian and development sectors.

WHERE TO FIND GLOBAL CLIMATE SCENARIOS AND FORECASTS

Reliable sources for global climate forecasts, scenarios, and impacts include:

- IPCC Interactive Atlas: Comprehensive maps and climate impact projections
- INFORM Risk Index: Risk assessments on hazards, vulnerability, and capacity
- World Meteorological Organization (WMO): Forecasts, climate data, and seasonal predictions
- UNDRR Risk Information Exchange
- UNICEF's Children's Climate Risk Index (CCRI): Child-focused climate risk analysis