Glossary of Climate-Related Terms for Cluster Coordinators

There are many climate-related terms in use across humanitarian, disaster risk, and climate sectors. Some are well-aligned, while others are used differently depending on the context — which can lead to misunderstanding or inconsistent use in coordination, planning, and funding proposals. UNICEF's Provider of Last Resort responsibility as Cluster Lead Agency intersects with and complements UNICEF's core mandate and core principles under which it delivers humanitarian response for Child Protection, Education, Nutrition, and WASH. These should be considered as mutually reinforcing of UNICEF's Provider of Last Resort commitment to advocate and act to fill critical gaps in these sectors.

This glossary provides a structured overview of key terms used in humanitarian settings, grouped under three broad categories:

- Framing and context-setting terms
- Risk, hazard, and event types
- Climate action and response terms

Where terms are commonly confused or interpreted differently across sectors, a short clarification and tip for coordinators is provided.

1. FRAMING AND CONTEXT-SETTING TERMS

Climate change

Definition*:* Long-term shifts in global or regional climate patterns — such as rising average temperatures, changing rainfall patterns, increased heatwaves, sea level rise, and more frequent and severe extreme weather events. These changes are **primarily caused by human activities**, including burning fossil fuels, deforestation, and industrial agriculture, which increase greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere（*IPCC, 2023).*

Note*:* "Climate change" refers to human-induced changes in climate patterns, but it can be confused with natural variations and cycles, such as El Niño or solar cycles. While not all extreme weather events are solely due to climate change, there is global scientific consensus that climate change significantly contributes to their increased frequency and severity (IPCC, 2023). In humanitarian and scientific contexts, "climate change" is a technical term distinct from "climate crisis," which is advocacy-focused and less precise.

Climate crisis

Definition: The urgent and severe impacts of climate change on people, communities, and systems, including extreme weather events, food and water insecurity, displacement, and health risks. It is widely used in advocacy, communications, and strategic documents to emphasize the need for rapid, systemic changes in humanitarian and global responses to climate risks (Adapted from IASC, 2021; UNDP, 2024).

Note: Climate crisis" is a framing term, not a technical one. As a non-technical, advocacy-focused term, it's inconsistently interpreted—some view it as a specific emergency, others as a broad trend. In operational contexts (e.g., HNOs), it may lead to ambiguity about whether it refers to an event or systemic issue, risking resource misdirection (e.g., prioritizing resilience over immediate aid).

Climate-related emergency

Definition: An operational term used in humanitarian response planning to describe emergencies that are triggered or intensified by climate-related events, such as:

- Droughts
- Floods
- Cyclones
- Heatwaves

These emergencies require a humanitarian response, whether or not the event can be scientifically attributed to climate change. The term is used in IASC guidance, Humanitarian Needs Overviews (HNOs), and Humanitarian Response Plans (HRPs) (IASC, 2020).

Note: This term is sometimes confused with "climate emergency" or "climate crisis", which are

more commonly used in advocacy or political contexts. In contrast, *climate-related emergencies* are grounded in practical, real-time response needs.

Climate emergency

Definition: A framing term used to highlight the urgent need for action to address escalating climate change impacts, such as extreme weather, displacement, or food insecurity. It is primarily employed in advocacy, political messaging, or strategic communications. While it may be linked to symbolic policy statements by governments or organizations (e.g., a city council's resolution on climate urgency), buit is not a formal humanitarian emergency declaration in IASC or UN frameworks. (Adapted from IASC, 2021; UNDP, 2024).

Note: "Climate emergency" is a non-technical term "Climate emergency" is a non-technical term and should not be confused with operational terms like "climate-related emergency" or formal humanitarian emergency declarations.

Tips for coordinators on when to use these terms

Term	When to use the term?	Example of usage of the term
Climate change	Use this term when describing situations clearly related to long-term, human-induced shifts in climate patterns, especially in operational planning, technical documents, or proposals where clarity and precision are important.	Climate change is causing more frequent droughts, requiring investments in drought-resilient agriculture.
Climate crisis	Use this term for situations requiring urgent advocacy, donor appeals, fundraising, and strategic communication emphasizing immediate action due to severe climate impacts.	The climate crisis is driving displacement from hurricanes and urgently requires shelter funding.
Climate-related emergency	Use this term in operational documents and Cluster coordination and planning discussions when describing humanitarian needs caused or worsened by climate events. This term is appropriate even when scientific attribution to climate change is unavailable or uncertain—what matters is the humanitarian impact of the event.	Heavy rains led to flooding, creating a climate-related emergency and triggering a humanitarian response.
Climate emergency	Limit "climate emergency" to advocacy, political, or donor messaging to emphasize urgency (e.g., "The climate emergency demands rapid funding for adaptation"). In humanitarian operations, use "climate-related emergency" to clearly signal acute climate-driven impacts (e.g., "A climate-related emergency due to flooding requires $5 million for relief"). Avoid using "climate emergency" in	The climate emergency demands rapid funding to protect communities from rising sea levels.

operational documents (e.g., HNOs, HRPs) or interchangeably with other terms to ensure clarity.

Climate-sensitive

Definition: Describes sectors, services, or populations that are particularly vulnerable to changes in climate conditions, such as rainfall, temperature, or seasonal variability. Common examples include nutrition, agriculture, water supply, and public health systems.

Note: Climate sensitive may be misinterpreted to mean that a programme is aware of climate risks, rather than vulnerable to them. This is about sensitivity to the climate, not about being adapted or prepared.

Climate-responsive

Definition: Refers to humanitarian or development actions specifically designed to anticipate, respond to, or adapt to climate-related risks and impacts, focusing on anticipatory actions (short-term, proactive measures triggered by early warnings or forecasts) and adaptation actions (longer-term measures to reduce vulnerability and improve resilience to climate change). It excludes mitigation actions, which aim to reduce greenhouse gas emissions or increase carbon storage (Adapted from IASC, 2021; UNDP, 2024).

Note: "Climate-responsive" is an umbrella term for actions addressing climate risks through anticipation or adaptation, distinct from "climate-responsible," which focuses on mitigation (e.g. reducing emissions).

Climate-responsible

Definition: Refers to humanitarian actions that actively aim to reduce their environmental and climate impact, for example, by reducing carbon emissions, avoiding deforestation, or using renewable energy in operations.

Note: Not yet a standardised term. It can be confused with "climate-sensitive" (focuses on vulnerability) and "climate resilient" (focuses on adaptation), rather than reducing climate impact.

Tips for coordinators on when to use these terms

Term	When to use the term?	Example of the usage of the term
Climate-sensitive	Use this term when describing contexts or services that are highly affected by climate variability (e.g. food systems in drought-prone areas), especially in needs assessments and vulnerability analyses.	The nutrition program in Region X is climate-sensitive due to its reliance on rain-fed agriculture, which is vulnerable to prolonged droughts.
Climate-responsive	Use this term to describe interventions addressing climate risks through anticipatory actions or adaptation, clearly specifying whether actions are anticipatory (e.g., cash transfers before floods) or adaptation-focused (e.g., climate-smart agriculture) to avoid ambiguity. For mitigation-focused actions,	The climate-responsive cash transfer program provides anticipatory aid to households before predicted floods, while drought-resistant crop training

	use “climate-responsible” or specify mitigation explicitly. In funding proposals, clarify that “climate-responsive” excludes mitigation to align with humanitarian priorities (e.g., IASC, 2021).	supports long-term adaptation to changing rainfall patterns.
Climate-responsible	When using this term, explain what makes the activity climate-responsible (e.g. switching to solar energy, using sustainable building materials). Link it to climate mitigation goals where relevant.	The refugee camp’s climate-responsible approach includes installing solar panels to reduce carbon emissions from diesel generators.

2. RISK, HAZARD, AND EVENT TYPES

Climate risks

Definition: Potential negative consequences resulting from climate variability or extreme climate-related events. These risks affect people, livelihoods, ecosystems, and services. For example, a heatwave may lead to increased mortality, water shortages, and food insecurity (IPCC, 2023).

Note: Some may assume this refers only to long-term climate change impacts, but climate risks also include short-term and seasonal threats linked to weather patterns.

Climate hazards

Definition: Natural events or physical processes related to the climate system that can cause harm. Examples include floods, droughts, storms, and heatwaves (IPCC, 2023).

Note: Hazards are sometimes mistaken for risks. A climate hazard refers specifically to the natural event itself, independent of its consequences. A risk includes exposure, vulnerability, and potential impact. Hazards may also be mistaken for a climate-related emergency, but this term refers to the humanitarian impact and operational response required because of the hazard.

Climate shocks

Definition: Sudden, severe climate-related events that disrupt lives, systems, or services. These include flash floods, sudden droughts, or unexpected storms (IASC, 2020).

Note: The term “shock” is often used in humanitarian programming without distinguishing it from hazards or general emergencies.

Sudden onset climate events

Definition: Climate-related events that occur rapidly, often with little or no warning, and cause immediate, significant impacts are called sudden onset events. Examples include cyclones, flash floods, or landslides triggered by heavy rainfalls or storms (IPCC, 2023).

Note:

- The term “sudden onset event” could be confused with general terms like “shocks” or “disasters”.
- In Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) and Disaster Risk Management (DRM), these events are commonly referred to as “sudden-onset disasters” — a term used to contrast them with “slow-onset” or “protracted” disasters, such as droughts or sea-level rise (UNDRR, 2023).
- Without clear framing, humanitarian and climate actors may use different terminology to describe the same type of event, which can lead to

miscommunication in planning, coordination, or response.

Slow-onset climate events

Definition*:* Climate-related events or processes that develop gradually over an extended period, often with no clear start or end point, but with growing humanitarian consequences. Examples include multi-season droughts, sea level rise, persistent heatwaves, and prolonged water scarcity (IPCC, 2023; IASC, 2020).

Note*:* Because these events unfold gradually, they may be overlooked in early assessments, receive delayed funding, or be treated as development issues, even when they generate humanitarian needs.

Tips for coordinators on when to use these terms

Term	When to use the term?	Example of the usage of the term
Climate risks	Use this term as a broad, inclusive term for all types of risks associated with changing climate conditions. It is especially useful in risk assessments or vulnerability analyses	Climate risks identified in the assessment included increased food insecurity from drought and health impacts from heatwaves.
Climate hazards	Use this term when referring to the specific event or physical process itself (e.g., drought, flood, storm). Use “climate-related emergency” when referring to the humanitarian impact and response needs triggered by these events.	Common climate hazards in the region include seasonal floods, severe storms, and prolonged droughts
Climate shock	Use this term to highlight a short-term, disruptive event that requires immediate response. Suitable for needs assessments and response planning.	The recent flash floods were a climate shock, severely disrupting water services and livelihoods in the community
Sudden onset climate event	Use this term when referring to climate-related hazards that occur rapidly and require immediate preparedness or early response measures (e.g. cyclone alerts, flood warnings).	Cyclones and flash floods are examples of sudden onset climate events that require rapid early-warning systems and quick humanitarian responses.
Slow onset climate event	Use this term in strategic planning, early warning, and resilience-focused programming — especially when	Multi-year droughts and rising sea levels are slow-onset climate events, often requiring sustained

addressing chronic climate impacts like drought or sea-level rise.

assistance and long-term planning.

3. CLIMATE ACTION AND RESPONSE TERMS

Anticipatory climate action

Definition*:* Anticipatory climate action refers to short-term humanitarian measures specifically triggered by climate forecasts or predictions, aimed at mitigating or reducing immediate impacts of imminent climate hazards such as floods, storms, or heatwaves (IFRC, 2020). This represents a narrowed definition of the broader humanitarian concept of anticipatory action, as defined by the IASC, which encompasses forecast-based measures ahead of any predictable crisis (IASC, 2020a). Examples of anticipatory climate actions include pre-cyclone cash transfers, distributing emergency supplies ahead of anticipated flooding, or establishing mobile health clinics before predicted heatwaves (IASC, 2020). This term is increasingly used to emphasize the proactive and preventative nature of climate-focused interventions within humanitarian frameworks. See this brief video for more information on anticipatory action.

Note*:* Because anticipatory climate actions occur before a disaster, they can sometimes be mistakenly categorized as disaster risk reduction (DRR) or climate adaptation actions. However, anticipatory actions are specifically event-focused, short-term, and triggered by credible forecasts, unlike DRR or climate adaptation which address broader, longer-term risks and systemic changes (IASC, 2020).

Climate adaptation

Definition*:* Actions that aim to reduce vulnerability to the current and expected impacts of climate change by adjusting systems, infrastructure, services, or behaviours. Examples include building flood-resistant infrastructure, promoting drought-tolerant crops, or revising health protocols to account for heatwaves (IPCC, 2023).

Note: In humanitarian settings, adaptation can be mistaken for short-term preparedness or anticipatory action, because all three involve proactive measures. However, climate adaptation is longer-term and often structural or policy-oriented, designed explicitly to strengthen community and household resilience, reducing vulnerability and enhancing capacity to manage future climate shocks, which may be increasingly frequent, severe, or less predictable while anticipatory actions are event-specific and short-term.

Climate mitigation

Definition: Efforts to reduce or prevent the emission of greenhouse gases, with the goal of slowing or limiting global warming. Common examples include transitioning to solar energy, using fuel-efficient vehicles, or reducing waste (IPCC, 2023).

Note: In the climate sector, mitigation always refers to reducing emissions. But in humanitarian and DRR sectors, the word “mitigation” is commonly used to mean reducing the impact of a disaster (e.g. reinforcing buildings) or risks such as GBV risks. This dual meaning can cause confusion in joint planning.

Climate resilience

Definition: Climate resilience is the capacity of individuals, communities, institutions, and systems to anticipate, cope with, withstand, recover from, and adapt to climate-related shocks and stresses. It is an outcome achieved through short-term anticipatory measures and longer-term adaptation actions aimed at reducing vulnerability and enhancing preparedness for future climate impacts (Adapted from IASC, 2020).

Note: Climate resilience should be understood as an outcome rather than as a specific action. It results from successful anticipatory climate actions (short-term measures triggered by forecasts) and climate adaptation (longer-term structural or systemic adjustments). Clearly framing resilience as an outcome helps to avoid confusion with anticipatory actions or adaptation actions themselves.

Climate informed

Definition: Climate informed refers to the integration of climate-related data, information, and knowledge into decision-making processes. It involves using relevant and context-specific climate information—such as projections, forecasts, and risk assessments—to guide planning and actions across sectors and communities. Climate-informed decision-making enables stakeholders to better manage current and future climate risks by aligning decisions with the best available science and local realities.

Note: Being climate informed is not a specific action but a characteristic of decision-making processes. It reflects the extent to which decisions are shaped by timely, tailored, and credible climate information. This approach supports both anticipatory and long-term adaptation efforts by ensuring that climate risks and opportunities are systematically considered.

Tips for coordinators on when to use these terms

Term	When to use the term?	Example of actions
Anticipatory climate action	Use this term specifically for short-term, forecast-triggered humanitarian activities. Clearly differentiate these from DRR (long-term risk reduction measures) and climate adaptation (long-term adjustments and system-level changes).	• Activating rapid-response child protection teams and setting up child-friendly spaces (located in flood-safe areas or are flood resident) ahead of forecasted floods, to immediately safeguard displaced or separated children (Child protection). • Distributing portable learning kits to students in coastal schools before a forecasted tropical storm enables continued education during school closures (Education). • Prepositioning supplementary food supplies for children ahead of a predicted drought-related food shortage (Nutrition). • Distributing water purification tablets and hygiene kits before forecasted flooding (WASH).
Climate adaptation	If your sector's response plan includes long-term vulnerability reduction to future climate risks, label it as "adaptation." If it involves short-term actions tied to	• Integrating climate risk assessments into child protection plans to systematically identify and reduce vulnerabilities related to chronic climate impacts (Child protection).

	forecasts, clarify that it is "anticipatory action."	• Constructing heat-resistant school infrastructure to maintain attendance during increasingly frequent heatwaves (Education). • Supporting community gardening programs using drought-resistant crops to improve long-term nutritional resilience (Nutrition). • Building elevated latrines and flood-resistant water points to maintain access during recurring flooding (WASH).
Climate mitigation	Always say "climate mitigation" when referring to greenhouse gas emissions. Use "disaster risk mitigation" or specify the hazard (e.g. flood mitigation) when referring to risk reduction in humanitarian or DRR contexts.	• Implementing solar lighting and energy-efficient designs in new school constructions contributes to climate mitigation by reducing greenhouse gas emissions from fossil fuel sources. • Adopting low-carbon cooking technologies (e.g., fuel-efficient cookstoves or solar cookers) in feeding programs for internally displaced communities contributes to climate mitigation through measurable emission reductions. • Switching from diesel generators to solar-powered water pumping systems in humanitarian water supply **c**ontributes to climate mitigation by reducing greenhouse gas emissions linked to water services.
Climate resilience	Use 'climate resilience' explicitly as an outcome describing strengthened capacity from actions taken. Explain how anticipatory measures (e.g., early warnings, pre-disaster cash transfers) and longer-term adaptations (e.g., resilient infrastructure, sustainable livelihood strategies) collectively enhance community or sector resilience.	Providing anticipatory social cash transfers and conducting awareness campaigns on family tracing **before** forecasted floods, activating rapid-response child protection teams to safeguard displaced or separated children **during** flooding, and establishing long-term community-based child protection networks **after** the events to improve resilience against future climate-related displacement.

Climate informed	Use this term when referring to decision-making processes, policies, or programming that are shaped by credible, timely, and relevant climate information. This includes the use of climate data, forecasts, risk assessments, and projections to guide planning and actions. It should be used to describe how climate information is integrated into decisions, not the actions themselves.	• Designing education continuity plans that incorporate seasonal forecasts to adjust school calendars or prepare for expected disruptions (Education). • Incorporating climate projections into nutrition assessments to anticipate how changing rainfall patterns may affect food availability and child nutrition over time (Nutrition). • Using localized flood risk maps to inform the siting of child-friendly spaces or shelters (Child protection). • Integrating drought forecasts into water trucking plans to ensure timely service coverage in high-risk communities (WASH).

Climate-responsive actions

Definition: Humanitarian interventions that explicitly take climate risks into account in their design or implementation. For example, adjusting food distributions during prolonged droughts, or altering shelter designs in cyclone-prone areas (Secretariat for the Climate and Environment Charter for Humanitarian Organisations, 2021).

Note: It can be mistaken for climate adaptation, but the key difference is that climate-responsive actions are often adjustments to existing humanitarian programming, not new long-term development initiatives.

Climate-responsive cash transfers

Definition: Cash transfers specifically designed to address climate risks by supporting early actions, adaptation, and resilience-building. Climate-responsive cash transfers can include:

- **Anticipatory cash transfers:** Financial assistance provided to vulnerable populations before a predicted climate-related disaster, intended to enable early action and mitigate potential impacts (World Food Programme [WFP], 2023; Cash Hub, 2023).
- **Adaptive cash transfers:** Financial resources aimed at enhancing households' ability to adapt and build resilience in the face of ongoing climate stresses. They typically support investments in sustainable livelihoods and climate-resilient infrastructure (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2024; Bowen et al., 2020).

Nature-based adaptation

Definition: Nature-based adaptation means using natural ecosystems—such as forests, wetlands, or mangroves—to protect people and communities from climate change effects like floods or droughts, while also providing benefits like clean water and food. The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) defines ecosystem-based adaptation, a key form of nature-based adaptation, as "a strategy for adapting to climate change that harnesses nature-based solutions and ecosystem services" (UNEP, 2024).

Tip for coordinators:

When referencing nature-based adaptation, highlight the specific ecosystems being leveraged, the intended protective or adaptive benefits, and any additional ecosystem services provided. Use examples to illustrate the practical benefits clearly in funding proposals, operational plans, or advocacy materials. (See the table below for examples)

Sector	Example of Nature-Based Adaptation	How It Helps
Child Protection	Establishing shaded green spaces or natural buffer zones around child-friendly spaces or safe play areas within displaced or vulnerable communities.	Provides secure environments for children affected by emergencies to safely gather, reducing exposure to heat stress and environmental hazards, and supporting psychosocial recovery. The presence of natural shade and greenery contributes positively to mental well-being, decreases stress levels, and supports social interactions and resilience-building activities among children.
Education	Green schoolyards with trees and vegetation to provide shade and reduce heat stress, or wetland restoration near schools to manage flood risks.	Creates cooler, safer learning environments, reducing heat-related illnesses and enabling consistent school attendance. Wetlands near schools can prevent flooding, ensuring access during extreme weather.
Nutrition	Agroforestry or sustainable farming practices, such as planting trees alongside crops to improve soil fertility and water retention.	Enhances food security by stabilizing crop yields in changing climates, providing nutrient-rich foods. Trees prevent soil erosion and maintain moisture, supporting consistent harvests.
WASH	Protecting and restoring watersheds (e.g., forests around rivers) to maintain clean water supplies and reduce flooding.	Ensures access to safe drinking water during droughts or floods, reducing waterborne diseases that disproportionately affect children. Healthy watersheds filter water naturally, supporting hygiene.

Forecasts (climate and weather)

Definition: Predictions of future climate or weather conditions, typically based on scientific models and data, used to inform decision-making across multiple timescales. Forecasts support operational actions, such as triggering anticipatory measures to protect lives and services from immediate hazards, and strategic planning, such as shaping medium- to long-term adaptation priorities to address evolving climate risks (Pörtner et al, 2022). See the Anticipation Hub Practice Guide to Seasonal Forecasts for more information.

Tips for Coordinators on using forecasts for your work.

Purpose	Support Service Delivery	Inform Strategic Decision-Making
Use	Trigger anticipatory actions (short-term, operational adjustments).	Shape medium- to long-term adaptation programming and strategic priorities.
Timescale	Immediate to 3 months ahead (short-term hazard triggers).	3 months to 12+ months ahead (scenario-based planning).
Objective	Protect services and people before immediate hazards.	Adjust sector strategies and resource planning to future climate risks.
Examples	Pre-positioning supplies before expected floods, cash distributions ahead of drought.	Shifting response priorities to drought-prone areas, scaling up flood-resilient infrastructure investments.

Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR)

Definition*:* A set of measures aimed at reducing exposure, vulnerability, and the likelihood of disaster impacts before they occur. DRR includes actions such as early warning systems, public awareness, hazard mapping, building codes, and flood defences. These actions are relevant to all types of hazards — not just climate-related ones: These actions are relevant to all types of hazards, including:

- Climate-related hazards (e.g. floods, droughts, cyclones)
- Geophysical hazards (e.g. earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, landslides)
- Technological hazards (e.g. industrial accidents, chemical spills)
- Biological hazards (e.g. epidemics, zoonotic diseases) (UNDRR, 2023)

Note*:*

- DRR and climate adaptation often involve similar activities — like strengthening infrastructure or planning ahead — but DRR is hazard-neutral, while climate adaptation is specific to long-term climate risks.
- Some humanitarian actors may also confuse DRR with short-term actions like anticipatory response, which is not the same as long-term disaster prevention.

Disaster Risk Management (DRM)

Definition*:* A comprehensive approach that includes DRR, but also encompasses preparedness, response, recovery, and reconstruction. DRM addresses all phases of a disaster and integrates risk management across policies, systems, and institutions (UNDRR, 2023).

Note*:*

- DRM is often used interchangeably with DRR, but they are not the same: DRR is about preventing and reducing risks, while DRM covers the entire disaster cycle.
- DRM is often used in government or institutional planning frameworks, which may not align directly with humanitarian language.

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