



ICRC POSITION ON CLIMATE CHANGE, ARMED CONFLICT AND OTHER SITUATIONS OF VIOLENCE

BACKGROUND

Climate change is an existential threat to humanity, affecting every aspect of people's lives, and generating and exacerbating humanitarian crises around the world. The warming atmosphere, ocean and land – driven by human activity – are causing climate variations and extremes in every region, with over three billion people living in places that are highly vulnerable to climate change (IPCC 2023). Action taken to date by the international community to address climate change is not enough to prevent or reverse these trends.

The negative effects of climate change are being felt and will continue to be felt in some of the most extreme ways by people and communities in places affected by armed conflict and other situations of violence,¹ who are ill-equipped to cope with and adapt to change. Conflict-related environmental damage deepens the crisis further. For this reason, it is important for the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) to adapt its response in order to strengthen people's resilience to climate risks and environmental degradation, while limiting its own impact on the climate and the environment. The organization will also continue to use its influence to mobilize states, and humanitarian, development, climate and peace organizations and experts, to contribute to a holistic response in these environments.

KEY MESSAGES

1. Urgent, ambitious political action to reduce emissions and keep warming within a habitable range is needed in order to avoid the worst consequences of climate change on people.
2. Climate change is already impacting communities. People affected by armed conflict and other violence are among those most vulnerable and least ready to adapt. They are also among those most neglected by climate action. Climate action – and the funding to support – it must reach these communities.
3. The ICRC has a role to play in helping people affected by armed conflict and other violence cope with and adapt to increasing climate and environmental risks, in reducing its own environmental footprint, and in working with states, and development and climate organizations and experts, to scale up climate adaptation and environmental protection, and to avert, minimize and address losses and damages.

1. URGENT GLOBAL ACTION IS NEEDED TO AVOID THE WORST POSSIBLE OUTCOMES OF CLIMATE CHANGE

States have been negotiating for decades on how to limit the worst consequences of the changing climate. In signing the Paris Agreement in 2015, they agreed to limit warming to “well below” 2°C above pre-industrial levels and to aim for a maximum increase of 1.5°C. Yet, as of 2021, government pledges mean that warming will likely exceed 1.5°C in the near future, with no credible path to avoiding overshoot (WMO 2023; UNEP 2022).

Under all scenarios, some level of warming will continue because of past emissions, compounding and intensifying climate extremes and increasing humanitarian needs. Humanitarian organizations will not be able to address an exponential rise in needs alone. Nor can they directly reduce global greenhouse gas emissions in a meaningful way.

¹ Hereafter referred to as “armed conflict and other violence”.

Ambitious action to cut greenhouse gas emissions, halt biodiversity loss and environmental degradation, adapt to rising risks, and address losses and damages is needed in order to protect present and future generations. Many states have made commitments and developed strategies to this effect, but much more must be promised and delivered.

Without mitigation, the need for climate adaptation increases. People around the world are already having to adapt to new weather patterns and weather-related disasters, which have become more frequent and less predictable. Adaptation can imply simple changes such as switching to different crops. But it often entails transformative change – social, cultural, political and economic. The international community must invest in climate adaptation in line with commitments to support the most vulnerable and leave no one behind.

In the absence of effective mitigation, and beyond the limits of adaptation, climate change is already negatively impacting people's lives, homes, infrastructure, assets and livelihoods. These impacts are often felt most directly by those who are poor and marginalized. Even as states redouble efforts to mitigate climate change and accelerate adaptation, support for people to avert, minimize and address climate-induced losses and damages is essential to ensure that the most vulnerable – including those affected by armed conflict and other violence – do not fall even further behind.

2. TARGETED SUPPORT FOR PEOPLE AFFECTED BY ARMED CONFLICT AND OTHER VIOLENCE IS CRITICAL

People affected by armed conflict and other violence are among those hit hardest by the negative impacts of climate change: over half of the 20 countries that are least prepared and most vulnerable to climate shocks are enduring conflict (ND-GAIN). This is not because climate change directly causes conflict, but because conflict limits the ability of people, communities and states to adapt to and cope with shocks and risks. It damages infrastructure, disrupts economies and systems, undermines social cohesion, leads to displacement, and exacerbates health and economic disparities. The impacts are particularly dire when conflicts last for decades, as we see in too many places across the globe.

As climate shocks increase in frequency and intensity, communities enduring conflict and violence become ever more vulnerable. Yet efforts to bolster people's resilience to shocks are extremely weak in these places, and multilateral finance to support climate adaptation is severely lacking. The situation is particularly acute in areas outside full state control where, as of 2022, the ICRC estimates that some 175 million people live.

The amount of climate finance available to people affected by conflict and fragility is only a fraction of that available in more stable countries – even those that are just as, or even more, vulnerable to climate change (SPARC 2022). This situation stems from the limits of the current climate-action and finance architecture, which is designed for countries with functioning institutions, strong governance, and high technical and fiduciary capacity. In places where these conditions are not met, communities, local organizations and governments are largely unable to access climate finance, and the development agencies that help implement adaptation measures elsewhere are limited in their ability to operate. As the international community addresses the climate crisis, it can do better in conflict-affected settings by working locally in ways that are adapted to people's reality.

3. AS A HUMANITARIAN ORGANIZATION WORKING WITH PEOPLE AFFECTED BY ARMED CONFLICT AND OTHER VIOLENCE, THE ICRC HAS AN IMPORTANT ROLE TO PLAY IN ADDRESSING CLIMATE RISKS AND ENVIRONMENTAL DEGRADATION

In line with the [ICRC's plan of action for implementing the Climate and Environment Charter for Humanitarian Organizations](#), we are committed to doing our part to help communities affected by armed conflict and other violence adapt to climate change and environmental degradation, while limiting our own environmental footprint. By 2025, we will factor climate and environmental risks into all of our programmes, enabling delegations to take informed decisions in terms of preparing for, anticipating, absorbing and adapting to climate risk. This work goes hand in hand with our goal to maximize our environmental sustainability and reduce our greenhouse gas emissions by at least 50 per cent by 2030 relative to 2018 levels.

We will also continue to use our influence to mobilize urgent and more ambitious climate action and environmental protection in places affected by armed conflict and other violence. As part of these efforts, we will continue promoting respect for [international humanitarian law \(IHL\) rules and recommendations on the protection of the natural environment in armed conflict](#). Respect for relevant IHL rules can limit environmental degradation, thus reducing the harm and risks to which conflict-affected communities are exposed, including those resulting from climate change.

While local and international humanitarian organizations are often among the few parties on the ground in conflict-affected areas that have the capacity to deliver assistance and provide services, the ICRC has neither the expertise nor the resources to implement comprehensive climate action at the scale that is needed. Working closely with other components of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, communities, development bodies, states, academics and the private sector, we will [continue to advocate for comprehensive action to help people enduring conflict](#) adapt to a changing climate and environmental risks, and avert, minimize and address losses and damages.

CLIMATE CHANGE, ARMED CONFLICT, THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT AND IHL

Scientists generally agree that climate change does not directly cause armed conflict, but that it may indirectly increase the risk of conflict by exacerbating factors that can, in a complex interplay, ultimately lead to conflict (ICRC 2023).

In peaceful environments with solid institutions that provide social protection, resolve tensions, manage the use and allocation of resources in a sustainable and equitable manner, and ensure inclusive development, climate change does not cause conflict. Yet countries affected by armed conflict, other violence or fragility tend to suffer from the absence of strong governance and inclusive institutions. In such places, climate change may contribute to exacerbating and prolonging conflict and instability by further weakening institutions, systems and people's coping mechanisms. It may also aggravate communal violence (ICRC 2020a).

While climate change may not necessarily cause conflict, the natural environment is often negatively impacted by conflict. IHL, which applies in armed conflict, contains rules that provide specific protection to the natural environment, as well as general rules that protect it by virtue of its civilian character, including rules governing the conduct of hostilities (ICRC 2020b).

In certain circumstances, the environmental consequences of armed conflict can contribute to climate change (ICRC 2020a:17). For instance, the destruction of large areas of forest can have detrimental climate consequences, as can damage to oil installations, large industrial facilities and other infrastructure.

Although IHL rules do not expressly address climate change, they do set important limits that can reduce the detrimental climate impacts of the damage and destruction caused by armed conflict. By limiting environmental degradation, IHL rules can also reduce the harm and risks to which conflict-affected communities are exposed as a result of climate change. For example, by prohibiting attacks on objects indispensable for the survival of the civilian population, such as agricultural areas and drinking water, IHL protects vital natural resources from additional conflict-related harm.

Climate change can also accelerate biodiversity loss, which impacts the health and economies of local communities. IHL can provide a framework for designating areas of particular environmental importance or fragility as demilitarized zones during armed conflict, thus protecting these fragile hotspots from additional degradation.

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MISSION

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) is an impartial, neutral and independent organization whose exclusively humanitarian mission is to protect the lives and dignity of victims of armed conflict and other situations of violence and to provide them with assistance. The ICRC also endeavours to prevent suffering by promoting and strengthening humanitarian law and universal humanitarian principles. Established in 1863, the ICRC is at the origin of the Geneva Conventions and the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. It directs and coordinates the international activities conducted by the Movement in armed conflicts and other situations of violence.



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