

Global Crisis, Local Consequences: Who Protects the Vulnerable?

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Source: The United Nations

The world today is in a state of uncertainty. Leaders, policymakers, and ordinary people around the world struggle to anticipate what the future holds. There are active conflicts in different regions creating instability. These crises may appear contained, however, the deeply interconnected nature of the modern world makes true containment nearly impossible. This interconnectedness goes beyond trade and economics. Geography itself does not respect political borders. Climate change

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is perhaps the clearest example. Similarly, an economic shock originating in one region sends tremors across the global financial system, and a pandemic, as the world has witnessed, recognizes no boundary. Unfortunately, its consequences do not fall heaviest on those most responsible for it.

Within this shared vulnerability there lies a deeply troubling inequality. Not everyone is affected by shock of a global crisis equally. The most vulnerable populations consistently bear a disproportionate burden. This inequality particularly urgent is not simply because it exists, but it persists despite having the systems designed to prevent it. Governments, international institutions, and global governance frameworks were built, at least in part, with the promise of protecting the most exposed. That promise is increasingly hollow. Those responsible for shielding the vulnerable are failing.

Climate Crisis as Humanitarian Crisis

Climate change exposes the gap between cause and consequence more evidently. According to the OECD's Climate Action Monitor 2025, without stronger emission reductions, risks will worsen for communities worldwide. It warns that the planet may be approaching tipping points; thresholds where Earth systems change which cannot be reversed². This warning is nothing new. However, despite the constant warnings, the inaction persists.

Those responsible for this crisis do not share the burden. The Global South have devastating effects on vulnerable populations, which have been perpetuated by socio-economic and political as well as gender inequalities and non-existent interventions to adapt and mitigate its adverse effects³. In 2023 alone, 363 climate- and weather-related disasters affected over 70 million people, caused more than 23,000 deaths, and triggered 20.3 million internal displacements⁴. These people contributed almost nothing to the emissions driving these disasters.

² Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), *The Climate Action Monitor 2025* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2025), <https://doi.org/10.1787/1819c631-en>.

³ Bethuel Sibongiseni Ngcamu, "Climate Change Effects on Vulnerable Populations in the Global South: A Systematic Review," *Natural Hazards* 118, no. 2 (2023): 977–991.

⁴ Sepehr Marzi, Karmen Poljanšek, Eleni Papadimitriou, Daniele Dalla Valle, Andrea Salvi, and Christina Corbane, "Assessing future risk of humanitarian crises using projections of climate-related hazards, population, conflict and other socioeconomic variables within the INFORM framework," *Big Earth Data* 9, no. 4 (2025): 676–713.

Africa is at the epicenter of overlapping crises such as economic shocks, climate disruptions, and geopolitical tensions and its economies show far greater volatility than the global average⁵. In 2023, climate disasters alone triggered six million displacements across Africa, accounting for 23 percent of all disaster displacements globally. Yet the governments struggle hard across the continent to tackle the crisis. Across Africa, nearly half of all states now spend more on servicing debt than on essential sectors like health and education. Early warning systems and cash relief program exist, but their reach remains thin and uneven.

South Asia tells a similar story. The 2022 floods in Pakistan submerged one-third of the country. Over 400 children died, 3.4 million children needed urgent aid, and more than 18,000 schools were destroyed⁶. UNICEF's Children's Climate Risk Index already ranked Pakistan the highest-risk country in Asia for children before the floods hit.



Source: The Guardian

⁵ UN Trade and Development (UNCTAD), "Africa's Vulnerability to Global Shocks Highlights Need for Stronger Regional Trade," UNCTAD, <https://unctad.org/news/africas-vulnerability-global-shocks-highlights-need-stronger-regional-trade>.

⁶ John Sifton and Saroop Ijaz, "Pakistan Floods Dire for Millions of Children," Human Rights Watch, September 7, 2022, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/09/07/pakistan-floods-dire-millions-children>.

Bangladesh presents another example from the same region. According to World Risk Index Bangladesh ranks ninth on the of countries most vulnerable to extreme weather and climate impacts. However, Despite producing only 0.3 percent of global greenhouse gas emissions. The consequences are already severe and worsening. Disasters displaced people within Bangladesh 14.7 million times between 2014 and 2023, and the World Bank projects that by 2050, up to 19.9 million people in Bangladesh⁷ could be internally displaced due to climate change alone. The country's 710-kilometre coastal belt, spanning 19 districts, is particularly exposed to salinity intrusion, cyclones, and storm surges, deepening poverty-driven migration.

The financial gap makes Bangladesh's situation particularly acute. Bangladesh faces annual financing needs estimated at USD 26 billion to address its climate crisis, yet it can currently mobilize less than USD 3 billion. The response to this crisis also remains heavily skewed. Bangladesh's climate response is adaptation-heavy, while mitigation especially in renewable energy and low-carbon transitions remains underfunded and less operationalized. Meanwhile, the 2023 Adaptation Gap Report found that only 17 percent of adaptation finance between 2017 and 2021 supported community-focused projects meaning even the adaptation funding that does arrive rarely reaches the people most at risk⁸. Bangladesh is not an outlier. It is a warning. A country that bears almost no responsibility for the climate crisis is being asked to survive it largely on its own.

Conflict, Displacement, and the Abandonment of Civilians

Armed conflict adds another layer of vulnerability with devastating human consequences. The OCHA Global Humanitarian Overview 2025 describes 2024 as “a catastrophic year,” when “life expectancy drops, vaccination rates plummet, education suffers, maternal mortality skyrockets, and the spectra of famine grows”⁹.

⁷ Emran Hossain, “20m Internal Climate Migrants by 2050: WB Report,” *New Age*, September 15, 2021, <https://www.newagebd.net/article/149147/>.

⁸ United Nations Environment Programme, *Adaptation Gap Report 2023: Underfinanced. Underprepared. Inadequate Investment and Planning on Climate Adaptation Leaves World Exposed* (Nairobi: United Nations Environment Programme, 2023), <https://www.unep.org/resources/adaptation-gap-report-2023>.

⁹ <https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/world/global-humanitarian-overview-2025-enarfires>

By the end of 2024, the number of forcibly displaced people had reached a record 123.2 million¹⁰. In 2005, there were 37 million displaced people. By October 2024, that number had more than tripled. Those who are forced to flee are among the most vulnerable. They often face serious risks, including violence, enforced disappearance, torture, forced recruitment, and gender-based violence¹¹.



Source: Norwegian Refugee Crisis (NRC)

At the same time, many of these crises receive very little global attention. In countries like Angola, Mozambique, and Niger, people are dealing with conflict, hunger, and climate shocks often without meaningful international visibility or support.

Despite international laws meant to protect civilians, violations remain widespread. Human Rights Watch's World Report 2025 documents serious abuses in places like Gaza, Sudan, Ukraine, and Haiti. These include blocking humanitarian aid, targeting hospitals and aid workers, and even

¹⁰ World Bank Group, "Fragility, Conflict, and Violence," <https://www.worldbank.org/ext/en/topic/fragility-conflict-and-violence>.

¹¹ Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, "Summary of the UN Secretary-General's 2025 Report on R2P: Responsibility to Protect—20 Years of Commitment to Principled and Collective Action," May 29, 2025, <https://www.globalr2p.org/publications/summary-2025-report/>.

using starvation as a weapon of war. The report points to repeated failures of the international community to act, and thus allowing suffering to continue unchecked¹².

Supply Chain Shocks, Energy Volatility, and Global Crisis

Global crises extend beyond visible destruction and displacement. The disruption of supply chains and the resulting surge in prices, particularly for essential goods such as food and fuel trigger global shocks affect vulnerable populations.



Source: Al Jazeera

The COVID-19 pandemic was the first shock. During the pandemic the labor movement was restricted due to lockdowns, agricultural production slowed, and trade was limited and routes were disrupted that millions in developing countries relied on for affordable food and fuel. Before recovering from the pandemic shock, Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 triggered another wave of disruption. Ukraine and Russia together account for 29 percent of global wheat

¹² Human Rights Watch, *World Report 2025: Events of 2024* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2025), <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2025>.

exports and 62 percent of global sunflower oil¹³. With supply constrained, global prices surged, building on already elevated levels caused by pandemic-related disruptions and poor harvests.

The consequences for vulnerable populations are immediate. Domestic food prices rose sharply across countries in 2022, disproportionately affecting low-income households that spend most of their income on food¹⁴. Rising food, fuel, and fertilizer prices pushed 27.2 million more people into poverty and left 22.3 million more facing hunger across 19 developing countries¹⁵. The FAO further finds that a 10 percent increase in food prices leads to a 3.5 percent rise in moderate or severe food insecurity, with the sharpest inflation observed in low-income countries between 2022 and 2023¹⁶.

At this moment geopolitical tensions between the United States and Iran have intensified volatility in global energy markets. The Persian Gulf remains a critical oil transit route, and the disruption drives up fuel and fertilizer prices. For import-dependent countries, rising energy costs increase transportation and production expenses, which then cascade into higher food prices. This pattern is not new. From 2007–2008 to 2021–2023, and now in 2026 global shocks have repeatedly translated into local crises. Even as global prices stabilize, relief rarely reaches the poorest. The market recovers. The vulnerable do not.

Who Protects the Vulnerable?

If global crises affect the ordinary people, then the question is: who is responsible? The answer is not simple. The fragmented global systems, weak national governments, and the failure of institutions meant to protect people bear the responsibility.

¹³ Samia Kahil, “The Impact of the Russo-Ukrainian War on Global Food Security,” *Journal of Finance, Investment and Sustainable Development* 9, no. 2 (December 2024): 279–292.

¹⁴ World Bank Group, “Recognizing and Tackling a Global Food Crisis,” January 5, 2023, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2023/01/05/recognizing-and-tackling-a-global-food-crisis>.

¹⁵ Channing Arndt, Xinshen Diao, Paul Dorosh, Karl Pauw, and James Thurlow, “The Ukraine War and Rising Commodity Prices: Implications for Developing Countries,” *Global Food Security* 36 (2023): 100680.

¹⁶ Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, *The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2025: Addressing High Food Price Inflation for Food Security and Nutrition* (Rome: FAO, 2025), <https://www.fao.org/3/cd6008en/online/state-food-security-and-nutrition-2025/price-inflation-pressure-nutrition.html>.

At the global level, multilateralism is weakening. Cooperation between major powers is breaking down, and shared goals like climate action, poverty reduction, and pandemic preparedness are losing priority. The International Rescue Committee describes this as a “New World Disorder,” where rising geopolitical rivalry and declining cooperation leave vulnerable communities without support¹⁷. Even humanitarian aids are shrinking.

The United Nations, once seen as a central pillar of global protection, is also under strain. The International Crisis Group warns that the UN is facing serious political and financial challenges, including funding cuts and declining relevance¹⁸. Its weakening means fewer safety nets for those already at risk.

At the local level, governments, especially in fragile or crisis-affected countries, lack the capacity or sometimes the willingness to protect their own people. Weak governance, corruption, and poor crisis management often make situations worse. At the same time, economic pressures and policy choices, such as austerity measures, reduce spending on health, education, and social protection. This leaves poor households even more exposed during crises.

There is also a deeper injustice in how responsibility is shared. Wealthy nations have contributed the most to climate change, yet its worst impacts are felt by poorer countries. Arms exporters benefit from conflicts, while millions are displaced. Financial systems often place the burden of adjustment on those least able to bear it.

International law exists to protect civilians, but enforcement is weak. Reports continue to show violations, rising impunity, and a lack of political will to act. In many conflicts, aid is blocked, civilians are targeted, and basic rights are ignored. In the end, the problem is not just institutional rather it is political and moral. Systems fail because decisions fail. And too often, those with the power to act choose not to.

¹⁷ Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, “Emergency Watchlist 2025,” accessed April 30, 2026, <https://www.globalr2p.org/watchlist/>.

¹⁸ International Crisis Group, “Ten Challenges for the UN in 2025–2026,” September 9, 2025, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/sbr/global/sb13-ten-challenges-un-2025-2026>.

Conclusion

The problem is not just that crises are becoming more frequent. It is that the systems designed to respond are weakening. Global cooperation is declining. National governments are struggling or failing to protect their own people. At the same time, the gap between promises and real support continues to grow. For millions of people, protection exists more on paper than in reality.

Yet, this is not inevitable. The same interconnected world that spreads crises can also enable collective solutions. Stronger social protection systems, fairer global financing, and genuine political commitment can make a difference. But these require choices; choices to prioritize people over politics, and long-term stability over short-term gain. At its core, this is a question of responsibility. Who protects the vulnerable? The answer cannot be left to weakened institutions alone. It must come from governments, global leaders, and societies willing to act. Until that happens, the burden will continue to fall on those who are least able to carry it.