

A person is walking away from the camera on a paved path that curves to the right. The path is surrounded by trees and foliage, and the scene is shrouded in a thick fog or mist, creating a somber and uncertain atmosphere. The person is wearing a dark jacket and pants.

The Future of International Protection in the EU+ in the Next 10 Years

Summary Report



Manuscript completed in December 2022

Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2022

ISBN 978-92-9403-003-0

DOI: 10.2847/773200

BZ-03-22-266-EN-N

© European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA), 2022

Reproduction is authorised provided the source is acknowledged. For any use or reproduction of photos or other material that is not under the EUAA copyright, permission must be sought directly from the copyright holders.

Scenario Analysis for the Future of International Protection in the EU+ in the Next 10 Years

Summary Report

December 2022

Disclaimer

The report has been developed in the frame of the project “The Future of International Protection in the EU+ in the Next 10 Years”. It describes the development of four different scenarios presenting alternative possible futures for international protection in the EU+. These scenarios were developed through a multi-phase process integrating expert advice on a number of factors.

Scenarios are narrative representations of possible futures, but they are not meant to be accurate predictions of what will happen. Rather, these scenarios are written to help readers explore plausible and coherent images of the future in order to reflect upon our present actions and decisions as well as to develop a more anticipatory approach.

The output expressed **does not imply a policy position** of the European Union Agency for Asylum. Neither the European Union Agency for Asylum nor any person acting on behalf of the European Union Agency for Asylum is responsible for the use that might be made of this report.

The images used for the scenario personas are not real people. Any resemblance to persons living or dead is purely coincidental.

List of Abbreviations

Term	Definition
AI	Artificial intelligence
APD (recast)	Asylum procedures directive — Directive 2013/32/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 26 June 2013 on common procedures for granting and withdrawing international protection (recast)
CEAS	Common European Asylum System
COI	Country of origin information
EUAA	European Union Agency for Asylum
EU	European Union
EU+ countries	Member States of the European Union (27 countries) and associated countries Norway and Switzerland
Refugee Convention	The 1951 Convention relating to the status of refugees and its 1967 Protocol (referred to in EU asylum legislation and by the CJEU as the Geneva Convention)
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees



Executive Summary

This report is the final output of a multi-phase foresight project undertaken by the European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA) to better understand the complex interactions that could shape the future of international protection in the European Union (EU). The four scenario narratives presented here reflect divergent developments of key factors that are together shaping the outlook on international protection for the next 10 years. These scenarios are particularly underpinned by the development of key factors *external* to the European Union, including armed conflicts, climate change, food insecurity, water scarcity, and rapidly evolving information ecosystems and digital technologies.

One scenario is optimistic, outlining how extensive economic development funding, international cooperation on bolstering human rights and technological solutions might be significant change factors for the future of international protection. Two of the scenarios present different configurations of geopolitical power that could emerge and alternative types of technological, economic and political competition that can impact international protection operations and policy. Another scenario explores how the interaction of extreme weather events and other effects of climate change, combined with military conflicts and the use of digital surveillance technologies, leads to a surge in the number of people in need of international protection. Given that the scenarios were produced to convey changing global conditions that depart from our present-day perspective, some sensitive and controversial aspects of the scenarios were evaluated by experts who participated in a Delphi survey. Varied results clearly underscore the uncertainty in future developments and the possibility that any one of the scenarios (or parts thereof) may yet become reality. Based on specific challenges that emerge under each scenario's unique future conditions, crosscutting challenges for international protection were identified for three different areas.

Geopolitical tensions and other aspects of international relations is a key challenge area which should be monitored and integrated into preparedness activities and strategic planning in the realm of international protection, especially given the rapidity with which conflicts can emerge and escalate. Simultaneously, rapid technological developments in *Digitalisation and Datafication* appear to present new risks and harbour opportunities for efficiency gains in arenas like automated processing of international protection applications or supporting remote interviews and decision-making with artificial intelligence. Lastly, a number of challenges arise alongside intensifying effects of *Climate Change and Resource Scarcity*. While current international interpretation of the Refugee Convention does not include 'climate refugees', drought, desertification, flooding and extreme weather events can strain resource availability, disrupt fragile supply chains and amplify geopolitical tensions – which cumulatively require new types of protection.

While many of these challenge areas are beyond the control of institutions like the EUAA, the scenarios and accompanying analyses outline specific challenges that organisations can begin to prepare for in terms of, for example, monitoring, staff, training, strategic plans, building robust networks and forward-thinking policy adjustments.



Introduction and Project Approach

There exists no singular future that we are capable of knowing. As such, the practice of strategic foresight acknowledges that preparing for a variety of futures means creating a sense of familiarity with the scope of future possibilities. This project aims to provide the EUAA and its partners with future-oriented assets and skills to better prepare for and fulfil their mission within a dynamic, rapidly changing world. Through this project's multiple phases, teams consisting of mainly asylum and migration experts from the EUAA, asylum authorities of several EU+ countries (Belgium, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Malta, the Netherlands, Norway and Slovenia), the European Commission (DG HOME, Joint Research Centre), Frontex, Europol, UNHCR, ICMPD and Fraunhofer ISI created a set of coherent *future scenarios* – narratives that enable policy and decision makers to better perceive and respond to the complexity and uncertainty of possible futures.

The scenario development process began with the identification of a number of factors that were both external to the EU+ countries and driving change in international protection. Over the course of three workshops, EUAA experts together with representatives of national asylum authorities and partner EU institutions assessed the boundaries of each factor's possible development in the future and constructed several constellations of these fundamental factors. Such constellation of the fundamental factors were further refined and turned into four unique and viable future scenarios. Finally, a Delphi survey gathered quantitative and qualitative expert feedback into the likelihood and time-scale for critical aspects of each scenario.

In addition to the process benefits for the people involved, the following results are now publicly available in this short report:

- Overview of critical influencing factors and possible development paths;
- Four scenario narratives outlining the option space for the next 10 years;
- Persona descriptions supporting the immersion in the respective scenario;
- Results of a Delphi survey on critical aspects of the four scenarios;
- Compilation of wildcards and their significance in the context of the scenarios; and
- Critical challenges for actors in the context of international protection for individual scenarios and across all scenarios.

These aspects are further elaborated in a comprehensive project report and an interactive website.



Scenarios for International Protection in 2023

When examined as a collection of ‘images of the future’ for international protection, the scenarios present new perspectives on drivers of change shaping possible developments for international protection. Figure 1 presents the scenarios as overlapping narratives and illustrates how different developments for a few key factors outline larger external forces like geopolitical tension, digitalisation and climate change.

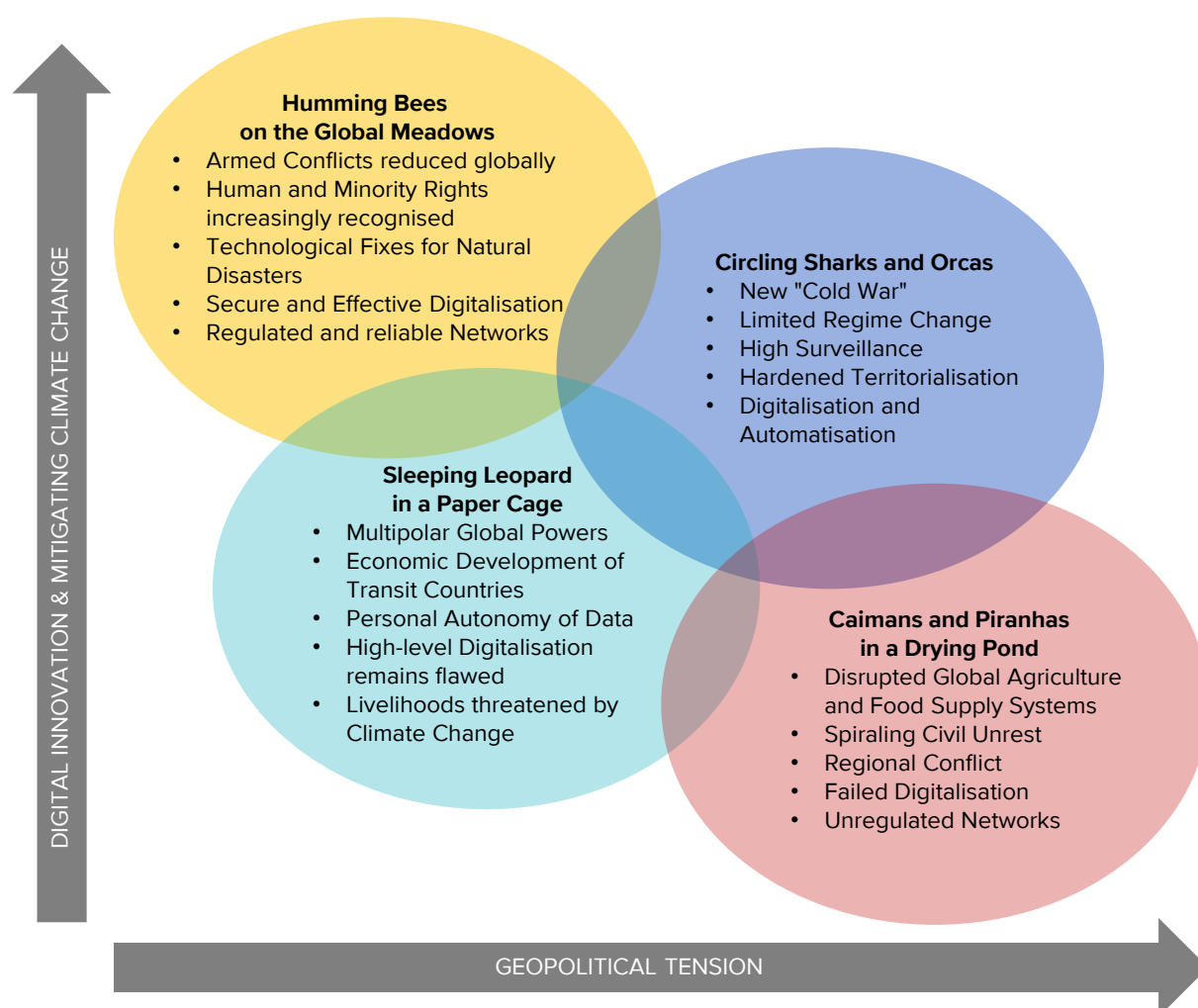


Figure 1: Overview of the four scenarios for the future of international protection in 2032



Scenario: Humming Bees on the Global Meadows



Summary

By 2032, the number and intensity of armed conflicts have decreased. Economic development in countries of origin and transit countries¹ can be observed.

Human rights, and minority rights in particular, are increasingly recognised globally. Growing environmental awareness and the use of technology to protect people from the effects of natural disasters are accompanied by successful court cases regarding the recognition of climate change-induced displacement.

Asylum application processes are digitalised to a large extent and make use of the improved data provision of digital networks and platforms.

Assessment

The Delphi results show that the statements linked to this scenario are predicted to take place further into the future. The participants see few problems with the technological possibilities and emphasise that the situations described do not reflect current development trends and therefore seem possible over a longer-term time horizon (10+ year) rather than as a shorter-term future.

Potential for an adjustment of the definition of international protection is noted. Almost two thirds of the participants expect an expansion in the definition under these conditions. Climate change is seen as the only possible reason for this. However, even under the conditions of this scenario, about a third of the participants do not expect the definition to be adjusted. These participants expect that climate change-induced resettlement will be regulated outside of international protection.

Critical Challenges

- There is disagreement on the adoption of conventions regarding the acceptance and treatment of 'climate refugees'.
- The economic development of traditional transit countries has an impact on general and asylum-related migration of foreigners temporarily residing in such transit countries.
- The use of AI and automated systems imply a major shift in application processing operations.
- Information sharing agreements are established between governments and their entities and social media is regulated to ensure information is trustworthy.

Wildcards

- A number of climate- and environment-related wildcards were seen as having the potential to push this scenario closer to reality. A prolonged drought or a breakthrough in potable water technology are examples of such wildcards that can shift global conditions, possibly towards increased cooperation and compromise.
- Other wildcards were assessed to have the potential to rapidly destabilise this scenario. Major cyberattacks or digital exploits could, for instance, undermine the digital systems vital in the scenario.

¹ In this scenario development activity, transit countries are understood as countries in the route between countries of origin and EU+ countries, whereby the latter are the supposed countries of destination.

Scenario: Circling Sharks and Orcas



Summary

By 2032, a new cold war between the global superpowers makes them determined to maintain the status quo. The threat of a large-scale armed conflict is omnipresent and dominates the action. The global superpowers put pressure on countries to avoid regime change and provide support for regional solutions mitigating the climate change effects.

Many authoritarian governments use new technologies for surveillance purposes and to pacify their populations. The asylum application processes have become largely automatised and remote application processes are mainly initiated in transit countries since territorialisation is hardened.

Assessment

Diverging expectation regarding the number of lodged applications compared to 2021 are expressed in the survey. The superpowers in this situation of a cold war have a great interest in suppressing instabilities and therefore larger refugee movements are expected to be oppressed. In addition, the digital and automated form of applications could be associated with risks and therefore not be used as extensively despite the initially seemingly easier access. Survey participants emphasise that the number of applications could remain unchanged or even decrease although the actual need for protection increases significantly in this scenario.

The introduction of “asylum quotas” was discussed as a lever for geopolitical tensions but it remained highly contested among the survey participants.

Critical Challenges

- A quota system regarding the total number of asylum seekers would represent a fundamental shift in the legal basis for international protection. Such a move would require new approaches to pre-assessing potential applicants.
- Impoverished and/or undereducated applicants may face difficulties with regard to applying for international protection using remote application platforms.
- The broad adoption of technologies for state surveillance activities enables persecution of state targeted groups and will require a profound understanding of these technologies.
- Technological approaches to alleviate the effects of climate change are dominant in this scenario, which might lead to unintended effects in the long run and in other parts of the world.

Wildcards

- The precarious stability that defines this scenario could be quickly undermined by the emergence of a major international war.
- The threat of a major cyberattack or disruption to digital services, and the emergence of large communities of anonymous digital assailants, are also viewed as the type of wildcard that could radically shift this scenario world into a different state.
- On the positive side, this scenario was also seen as providing the right type of global conditions to set the ‘global regulation of social media’ wildcard into motion or the rise of a legitimate digital state that would support asylum applications.

Scenario: Sleeping Leopard in a Paper Cage



Summary

By 2032, global power centres have unofficially divided the world into spheres of influence and increasingly acknowledge the special importance of transit countries for maintaining boundaries. Economic development in transit countries is therefore supported by major power blocs with a focus on developing job opportunities and the living conditions of migrants in these countries.

The relationship between people, their data and social institutions has shifted with the aim to give individuals control over their personal data. This development enhances the possibilities of data use in remote asylum application processing but flawed algorithms and systemic exploits remain problematic.

The increasing threat to livelihoods due to climate change remains unresolved.

Assessment

Participants assessed the unsolved problems caused by climate change as very possible well before 10 years. In contrast, the automated analysis of digital profiles might be realised later.

Extensive investment in transit countries is assessed as possible quite within the next 10 years, but the effectiveness of this measure is discussed very controversially. Some point out that the situation in transit countries is likely to be unstable especially since climate change could hit these countries hard.

The majority of the respondents expect the number of applications to slightly increase or remain the same compared to today if the situation in the transit countries improves and these countries are strongly supported by the major power blocs.

Critical Challenges

- The stimulation of economic development of "transit countries" could lead migrants and refugees to leave their countries of origin.
- Investment in transit countries might not be very effective and the political system in these countries might not be stable.
- The rise of the 'dark web' – anonymised, uncensored networks – as a response to digital surveillance and persecution creates challenges for safeguarding international protection applicants.
- Responsibility over the management of access to personal data creates a digital divide amongst the people in need of international protection.
- Given that food and water supplies around the world are disrupted because of climate change, the number of people in need might be extremely high but a large share might not have the resources to flee.

Wildcards

- Given the global conditions laid out in the scenario, many participants thought that a civil war or regime change within a transit country close to the EU would become more likely to occur.
- The climate change conditions sketched in this scenario were thought to increase the probability of severe environmental events, widespread prolonged drought and even a resource crisis within the EU.
- Participants thought that one positive wildcard could develop from this scenario – the creation of in-country 'safe zones' by the United Nations.

Scenario: Caimans and Piranhas in a Drying Pond



Summary

By 2032, numerous disruptions to global agriculture and food supply systems caused by the effects of climate change have led to conflicts and spiralling civil unrest in the global South.

Territorial boundaries have become hardened with infrastructure build-outs. There is a discrepancy between the legal frameworks of international protection and actual practices applied at the state borders.

The failed attempt to automate asylum application processes goes back to unreliable databases and leads to a more restrictive interpretation of international protection in many countries. Asylum seekers are negatively affected by unregulated social media.

Assessment

All participants expect more people in need of protection but there is disagreement if this will lead to slightly (around 40 % of respondents) or strongly (around 30 %) increased numbers of applications, since the demand will be so great that the state measures to limit migration cannot be successfully implemented.

A number of respondents pointed out that technologies create a new kind of border regime focused on surveillance and monitoring, as opposed to physical deterrence.

Some respondents believed that cybersecurity risks are already outpacing technological developments and that only limited uses of technologies would be both safe from attack and helpful and many respondents repeated the questionability of AI without human oversight.

Critical Challenges

- Armed conflicts lead to extremely high numbers of refugees and limit the possibilities of actors in the field of international protection.
- Cyberattacks on digital infrastructure have rendered many services and databases suspect or completely unusable.
- Widespread digital surveillance leads to a significant rise in targeted persecution, but also makes applying for international protection more dangerous and difficult.
- Organisations are faced with the challenge of building, maintaining and securing databases and digital tools that are decoupled from the wider Internet and are encrypted to safeguard data.

Wildcards

- Participants found many associations to wildcards that dealt with changes in international relations and governance. The dissolution of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization was a significant wildcard and was accompanied by major international war(s), civil wars and violent regime changes as well as widespread cyberattacks.
- Each of these wildcards was viewed as viable within this scenario – especially given the resource scarcity.
- On a more positive note, some participants imagined that resource scarcity could provoke innovations in potable water technology.

The scenario narratives are complimented by data gathered from the Delphi survey. Firstly, the survey reveals a wide range of opinions regarding the likelihood of most of the statements. This clearly emphasises the role of uncertainty in future developments. These findings underscore the importance of addressing the core strategic challenges through ongoing organisational assessment and planning activities to prepare the EUAA and its partners for all scenarios. Additionally, expert assessment tended to favour the more pessimistic views regarding the futures of international protection and support a more proactive stance towards institutional preparedness.

Figure 2 illustrates the aggregate Delphi results with respect to the key issues addressed within the scenario statements. Statements assessed as more likely to occur within a shorter time frame can guide institutional planning activities in the short term (e.g., Unreliable data limits AI use). Further, scenario statements that have a moderate likelihood of occurring within an extended time horizon can be useful in longer-term planning and strategy. For instance, the mentioned digital technologies that are facing short-term challenges (e.g., AI decision support for assessment of asylum applications; Automated analysis of digital profiles) offer the potential of new capabilities when their development in the next 5-7 years is taken into account. And institutional long-term strategies, in turn, will become more resilient when accounting for the possibility that these potentials may be realised, alongside the effects and changes such developments carry with them. In this way we can begin to see how the overlapping narratives illustrated in Figure 2 are useful in outlining more robust policies for specific key factor developments as included in the Delphi survey.

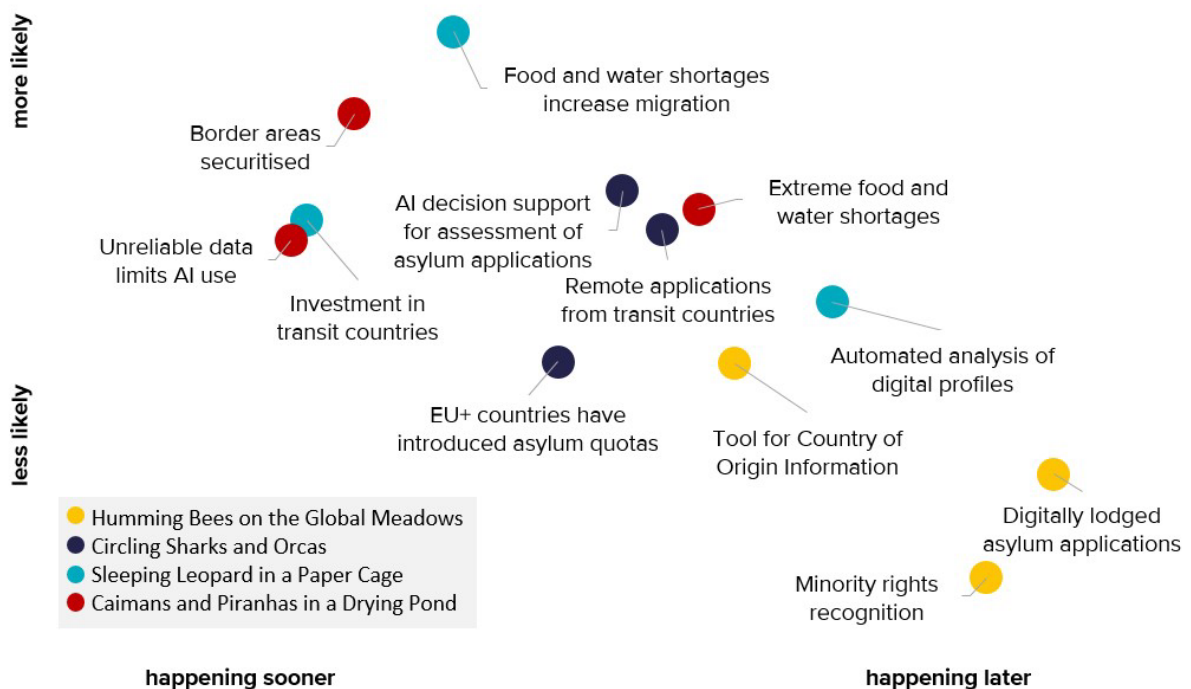


Figure 2: Aggregate Delphi results demonstrating scenario statement assessments in terms of degree of likelihood and time for actualisation



Critical Challenges Facing International Protection Actors

Identifying critical challenges present across the scenarios helps to prioritise as well as build preparedness and resilience for a wide spectrum of possible futures. This section outlines the challenges that play a role across all of the scenarios.

Geopolitics and International Relations

Armed conflicts – ranging through regional, national, and international warfare – are one of the greatest concerns with regard to the futures of international protection given the variety of challenges such conflicts present. The distinct possibility of widespread increase in armed conflict is explicitly taken up in one scenario (Caimans and Piranhas), while the threat of more frequent, smaller-scale armed conflict, particularly in transit countries, and the steps taken to avoid such incidents is explored in the others.

Transit countries and differing strategies to building relationships with them remain a source of challenges across all scenarios. Different forms of cooperation are possible, ranging from actual on-site processing in these countries to remote application support through the provision of digital infrastructures. Further challenges arise from the political instabilities in many transit countries and the very real threat that major disruptions (e.g., extreme weather, economic disruption, resource scarcity, etc.) can quickly destabilise socio-political systems in transit countries. Even in the case of stabilised geopolitical blocs, transit countries take on important strategic roles in maintaining stability by serving as migration channels or buffer zones between blocs. Challenges arise as international protection applicants live in transit countries for increasingly longer durations.

In view of a sharp increase in the number of people in need of protection in many scenarios, limitations on the number of refugees and the introduction of international protection quotas could become relevant. Regardless of the exact design of such an approach, this is a challenging idea with respect to the convention and its interpretation, and requires a thorough examination of different options and their implications.

Digitalisation and Datafication

As digital technologies continue to reshape many aspects of daily life and work, they present some distinct challenges within the context of international protection. The internationally coordinated use of transparent and explainable AI for increasingly automated processing of applications represents a particularly important challenge across numerous different scenarios. The reliability of the available data varies greatly across the scenarios and being able to evaluate the data quality accurately for different regions and at different points in time will be one of the major challenges in the future.



Across several scenarios, it was repeatedly emphasised that final decisions should still be made or at least supervised by a human being and only be supported by AI. Hence, the challenge will be to clearly define and continually refine which aspects can be largely handled unsupervised by AI and which aspects are deliberately assigned to human beings.

The increasing use of surveillance technologies is included in all of the scenarios, though it plays different roles in each. For example, one scenario presents surveillance used to protect and inform refugees and migrants, while another outlines an increasing use of state surveillance to monitor and persecute dissidents and minorities.

A major challenge for international protection is the risk of an increasing digital divide among refugees. For example, discrimination against asylum seekers with lower digital skills is a challenge that is discussed across the scenarios and will require explicit consideration in the design of future processing procedures by international protection authorities.

Climate Change and Resource Scarcity

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report on the impacts, adaptability and vulnerability (2022) states that climate change will be a defining driver of change for human society and mobility for the 21st century and will impact international protection. The continuation of climate change creates a number of challenges for international protection, even in scenarios in which human societies are taking proactive measure to limit or mitigate its effects.

In particular, the collapse of food supply chains due to climate crises and extreme weather events (and linked to subsequent conflicts) poses a major challenge for international protection. Several scenarios describe the refugee flows directly caused by these events as well as the migration movements due to violent conflicts in connection with the shortage of food supplies. Occurring over longer periods, changes to the productivity of agricultural lands could lead to the displacement of populations within countries and conflicts over any remaining productive land. Combined, these pressures could create the type of socio-political conditions that lead to regime violence against segments of their country's population. Under these conditions, it is hardly possible to distinguish between reasons for flight related to protection needs from economic reasons that are not included in the current convention interpretation.

Within the scenario process, it was disputed whether there could be a legal recognition of climate refugees within the framework of international protection within the next 10 years. The position was well-argued by some experts that changes to the UN convention that defines international protection would be difficult to find agreement on and that international protection could even lose potency in such negotiations. However, the idea that new policies or legal interpretations could evolve to grant 'climate refugees' a similar form of rights protections was too critical to be ignored during most expert conversations. Such a fundamental change would be accompanied by considerable challenges for the respective authorities, as the recognition criteria would have to be redefined and, if necessary, coordinated internationally.

