



Situational Update

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Environmental sustainability of reception facilities for asylum seekers

Introduction

Background

In recent years, environmental sustainability has gained ground at the international level, including within the EU. Discussions on climate governance are multi-faceted, involving diverse stakeholders and covering a broad range of issues.

Over the last decade, several instruments have been put in place to address climate change. The [Paris Agreement](#), signed by 196 countries in 2015, became the first legally-binding international instrument aiming to limit global warming. In the same year, the United Nations introduced the [2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#), a comprehensive framework consisting of 17 Sustainable Development Goals that address various societal concerns, with a primary component linked to environmental sustainability.

The [European Green Deal](#) was launched by the European Commission in 2019, and it includes a range of policies and measures involving different sectors, such as transport, industry, agriculture and energy. Its goal is to achieve a more sustainable and resource-efficient economy and to eliminate greenhouse gases emissions by 2050.



Most of the EU's gas emissions originate from the production and use of energy.¹ A transition towards the use of clean and renewable sources, the improvement of energetic efficiency and the energy performance of buildings – including reception facilities – are key aspects related to the achievement of the goals set out in the Paris Agreement and the European Green Deal.

Non-state actors, including [civil society organisations](#) and private companies, have become key stakeholders in these discussions, both advocating for and implementing climate actions. The [European Climate Pact](#) launched in 2020 as part of the Green Deal, for example, aims to bring together civil society organisations, the private sector and local authorities across the EU to share knowledge, best practices and solutions for climate action.

Climate refugees

Climate change has been increasingly recognised as a [driver of displacement](#), and it is estimated that over 70% of refugees and displaced persons worldwide come from areas with environmental degradation.² During the 27th United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP27) in 2022, refugees and displaced persons from climate-vulnerable areas warned that attempts to adapt to the changing climate are being overtaken by repeated extreme weather events.³

The notion of climate refugees is not currently defined by international or European instruments which govern international protection, but the triggering impact of environmental disasters on migration flows has drawn growing attention at the EU level.⁴

Impact of migration emergency and other crises

In 2022, the highest numbers of both [irregular border crossings](#) and [asylum applications](#) since 2016 were recorded in the EU, and the first months of 2023 confirmed the [growing trend](#). The increased arrivals caused significant challenges to reception authorities across EU+ countries which had to quickly increase accommodation capacity. A high number of arrivals means that there is higher consumption of resources such as water and food, adding pressure on the environment. In addition, new facilities to create additional accommodation places can have disruptive effects on the local environment.

¹ European Commission. (2022). *Energy and the Green Deal*. https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/european-green-deal/energy-and-green-deal_en

² United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. (2023, April 14). *Unhcr's Grandi urges world leaders not to forget displaced people at COP27*. <https://www.unhcr.org/news/press/2022/11/636814a04/unhcrs-grandi-urges-world-leaders-forget-displaced-people-cop27.html>

³ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. (2023, April 14). *Displaced people from climate frontlines raise their voices at COP27*. <https://www.unhcr.org/news/stories/2022/11/6377989a4/displaced-people-climate-frontlines-raise-voices-cop27.html>

⁴ European Parliamentary Research Service. (2022). *The future of climate migration*. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2022/729334/EPRS_ATA\(2022\)729334_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2022/729334/EPRS_ATA(2022)729334_EN.pdf); European Commission. *Communication from the Commission. The European Green Deal*. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:52019DC0640&from=EN>; European Parliament. (2020). *Climate Change and Migration. Study requested by the LIBE committee*. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2020/655591/IPOL_STU\(2020\)655591_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2020/655591/IPOL_STU(2020)655591_EN.pdf)

Russia's invasion of Ukraine further exacerbated the pressure on reception systems, not only due to mass inflows of displaced persons but also to soaring inflation and rising energy costs. Contingency planning and adaptation of reception systems to cope with both increased demand and higher costs of energy became a priority.⁵ In this context, discussions on the development of policies and strategies to increase the environmental sustainability of accommodation structures have begun to gain attention within EU+ countries.

Key findings

- ✓ In some EU+ countries, reception authorities have developed strategies specifically aiming to increase the environmental sustainability of accommodation structures.
- ✓ Even if a comprehensive strategy for reception is not in place, most countries implement climate-friendly measures to varying degrees.
- ✓ The majority of actions for environmental sustainability within reception systems involved the sustainable use of resources, including energy, water and paper. Some countries apply the principles of Green Public Procurement within their reception systems.

1. Strategies and policies

Most EU+ countries have developed comprehensive, long-term [national strategies](#) to meet the goals of the Paris Agreement. These are cross-cutting plans which cover a wide range of activities and economic sectors, and thus will likely impact the activities of reception authorities and organisations managing reception centres. Strategies specifically designed to increase the environmental sustainability of reception facilities are rare, but they do exist in some EU+ countries. In Belgium and the Netherlands, for example, national reception authorities have included environmental sustainability as an objective in their multi-annual planning.⁶ In addition, the French Office for Immigration and Integration (OFII) joined the [Sustainable Development Club for Public Establishments and Enterprises](#) in an effort to deliver its services in line with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

⁵ European Union Agency for Asylum. (2022, October 31). *Use of temporary reception structures during the winter season*. <https://euaa.europa.eu/publications/use-temporary-reception-structures-during-winter-season>

⁶ Centraal Orgaan opvang asielzoekers. *Summary. Multi-year strategy COA 2020-2025*. <https://www.coa.nl/sites/default/files/2020-11/Summary%20of%20the%20COA%20Multi-Annual%20Strategic%20Plan%202020-2025.pdf>; Fedasil. (2022). *Plan de management 2021-2026 [Management plan 2021-2026]*. https://www.fedasil.be/sites/default/files/fedasil_plan_de_management_2021_2026.pdf



Environmental sustainability has become a key element in the EU's funding programmes. The Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF) 2023-2025 [Work Programme](#) foresees climate and biodiversity mainstreaming as a key element, stating that the fund should support activities that respect the EU's climate and environmental priorities.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has made the 2030 Agenda one of its priorities, and in this context, the organisation developed several strategies to promote sustainable practices and reduce the environmental impact of its operations, including in the areas of energy and shelter.⁷ Its comprehensive framework for climate action includes aspects related to law and policy, the management of operations and reducing the organisation's environmental footprint. With regard to accommodation, in particular, UNHCR has also analysed shelter sustainability across its operations, including their environmental impact in terms of materials, CO₂ footprint, direct damage on natural habitats and potential opportunities for recycling.⁸

2. Sustainable solutions in reception facilities

Whether they are part of a comprehensive strategy or not, various measures have been introduced by national authorities and other stakeholders involved in the reception system to reduce the environmental impact of accommodation facilities for applicants for international protection.

Overall, most EU+ countries adhere to national environmental regulations when building **new structures**. For example, Germany has developed a sustainability certification system for buildings, which was first implemented in 2022 in North Rhine-Westphalia.⁹ The [system](#) mandates that all new construction projects and major renovation projects must meet specific requirements to ensure sustainability, and consequently, the system applies to newly-built or renovated reception facilities.

However, a common challenge faced by reception authorities is that they often rely on existing structures to host asylum applicants.

Nonetheless, plans for new reception facilities are underway in some countries. For example, the use of recyclable materials and the environmentally-friendly design of new reception facilities is currently foreseen in Lithuania, Luxembourg and Portugal in order to comply with national environmental regulations.

⁷ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. (2022). *Strategic Framework for Climate Action*. <https://reporting.unhcr.org/document/1207> ; United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. (2019). *Global Strategy for Sustainable Energy 2019-2025*. <https://reporting.unhcr.org/document/1306> ; United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. (2021). *Operational strategy for climate resilience and environmental sustainability 2022-2025*. <https://reporting.unhcr.org/document/1033>

⁸ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. (2021). *Shelter and sustainability overview*. <https://reporting.unhcr.org/document/1206>

⁹ Reception in Germany falls under the responsibility of the 16 federal provinces (Länders), thus the policies and measures in place vary across regions.



As part of the EUAA's operational assistance, the Agency provided support in setting up modular reception structures in Belgium, Cyprus, Greece, Italy and the Netherlands. While containers are provided with insulation, additional measures may be implemented depending on a country's specific requirements, including with regard to environmental sustainability. Discussions on improving the sustainability of these reception units have already begun in Belgium and the Netherlands, with a focus on upgrading materials used in the construction of the modular structures and using` renewable sources of energy to improve energy efficiency.

Reception authorities have implemented various measures to reduce dependency on conventional sources of **energy** and enhance the efficient use of energy resources within existing constructions. Solar panels have been installed in accommodation facilities in Germany, Lithuania, Portugal and Switzerland and are currently being considered in Poland. Increasing the insulation of buildings and installing heat pumps have proved to be useful energy-saving solutions in Germany, Poland and Slovakia.¹⁰ In Denmark, reception centres will have to reduce energy usage by 10% by 2030 and phase out gas furnaces and oil-fired boilers, in line with national strategies.

Initiatives in the area of **transportation** in the context of reception follow national strategies on the use of environmentally-friendly modes of transport. They include leasing or purchasing electric cars (for example in Belgium, Luxembourg and Poland) and promoting the use of bicycles, including electrical ones, as forms of sustainable transportation. In Belgium, for instance, charging stations for electric bicycles have been installed in reception centres, in line with a federal [Bicycle Action Plan](#).

In line with the European Green Deal, some reception authorities educate residents on sustainable **water management** practices. For example, Belgium and [Spain](#) have installed water-saving devices in restrooms and showers in reception facilities.

In addition, reception authorities in EU+ countries are compliant with local regulations on **waste management**, and most have recycling bins available in accommodation facilities and administrative offices.

Initiatives to raise awareness on sustainable solutions have been organised in Luxembourg, Poland and Slovenia. In Belgium, an [eco-team](#) is dedicated to the [sensibilisation](#) of residents about the protection of the environment, and in Sweden the [information](#) for newly-arrived residents includes a section on environmental awareness.

Finally, **digitalisation** has further improved sustainable practices. Spurred by the COVID-19 pandemic,¹¹ asylum and reception authorities digitalised many steps and procedures, which in turn reduced the need for physical products and services, such as paper or printed materials.

¹⁰ More information available here: <https://www.minv.sk/?OP-KZP>

¹¹ European Union Agency for Asylum. (2022). *Asylum Report 2022*. <https://euaa.europa.eu/publications/asylum-report-2022> ; European Migration Network. (February 2022). *The use of digitalisation and artificial intelligence in migration management*. <https://www.oecd.org/migration/mig/EMN-OECD-INFORM-FEB-2022-The-use-of-Digitalisation-and-AI-in-Migration-Management.pdf>



Lithuania and Slovenia have minimised paper use through digital archiving, favouring paperless operations and encouraging the use of recycled paper.

3. Sustainable procurement

[Green Public Procurement](#) has gained increased attention among EU+ countries. This approach aims to minimise the environmental impact of public sector purchases, by not only considering price and quality as determining factors, but also taking into account environmental criteria. In the context of reception, it becomes particularly relevant when accommodation or other related services are provided by third parties.

Some reception authorities across the EU have begun implementing clauses related to sustainability in procurement processes. Among them, Belgium, Italy, Lithuania, Slovenia and [Spain](#) have included requirements or indications related to sustainability in public tenders or related handbooks. Examples include requirements related to the purchase of electric vehicles (e.g. Belgium, Poland and Slovenia), investments in energy improvements in buildings (e.g. Belgium) and to the provision of biodegradable goods and chemical products (e.g. Italy).

4. The way ahead

Neither the [Reception Conditions Directive](#) nor the [New Pact on Migration and Asylum](#) include references to environmental sustainability. However, international discussions and national environmental strategies have led to measures favouring environmental sustainability which are implemented in reception facilities in many EU+ countries.

Nevertheless, adapting existing infrastructure or major investments into eco-friendly solutions are often hindered by budgetary limitations. Moreover, the current pressure on asylum and reception systems will likely lead to more immediate solutions being prioritised to rapidly increase reception capacity, diverting attention from long-term strategies related to sustainability.

The EU's emphasis on environmental sustainability within its funding opportunities may offer an alternative to countries aiming to make longer-term changes. Some national authorities have already undertaken cross-cutting projects in this way: Portugal developed a [project](#) to support the socio-economic integration of refugees arriving in Europe through the acquisition of skills related to the circular economy and recycling techniques.

Additionally, sharing best practices has sparked interest among EU+ countries, as solutions and initiatives vary greatly. In some countries, reception authorities have taken steps in this direction and are in the process of [introducing spaces for debate and discussions](#) on environmental sustainability and its potential effects on the future of reception systems.

Methodological note

In 2022, the EUAA launched a survey to gather information on environmental sustainability strategies and policies implemented in reception facilities in EU+ countries. The survey was disseminated to members of the EUAA Reception Network. In 2023 following the energy crisis in the EU, the EUAA revamped the survey to gather additional information from reception authorities. The information in this report is based on results of the survey, EUAA products and public sources. The information has been verified and validated by each national authority.

The reporting of developments does not imply an endorsement of practices or opinions on the part of the EUAA.

Additional resources

- [Use of temporary reception structures during the winter season](#)
- [Who is Who in International Protection in the EU+: Reception Authorities](#)
- [Overview of the organisation of reception systems in EU+ countries, Situational Update No 8](#)
- [Asylum Report 2022](#)