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Global Development Strategy: Information, Counselling and Legal Assistance (ICLA)



NRC NORWEGIAN REFUGEE COUNCIL

Global Development Strategy: Information, Counselling and Legal Assistance (ICLA)

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Approved by: Morgane Aveline, Global Programme Director

Owner: Katrien Ringele, Global ICLA Lead

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Norwegian Refugee Council
Prinsens gate 2
N-0152 Oslo
Norway

www.nrc.no

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Forced evictions are a constant threat for displaced families in Somalia. In Baidoa, the ICLA team have provided 1,100 people with vital information on using lease agreements to secure their homes and protect their rights.

NRC NORWEGIAN REFUGEE COUNCIL

Information, Counselling and Legal Assistance

The Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) is a leading legal protection actor in the humanitarian sector, recognised for our expertise in housing, land and property (HLP) rights, legal identity, and increasingly employment law and procedures. Our thematic areas address the key legal protection issues faced by people affected by displacement. By combining thematic expertise, technical service, and engagement with authorities, we ensure that Information, Counselling and Legal Assistance (ICLA) remains relevant, responsive and impactful and supports people to overcome legal barriers and progress towards self-reliance and durable solutions.

By the end of 2030, we will position ICLA as an enabler by strengthening institutions, supporting local actors, leveraging KOBLI, and growing our technical services to increase the capacity, quality and reach of legal protection services, amplifying collective impact beyond direct service delivery. We will strengthen first-line legal protection response and support people affected by displacement to access justice and resolve disputes, obtain remedies, and realise their rights while having a voice in how these processes are designed and delivered. We will focus on systems-strengthening in HLP work, grow our work on employment law and procedures (ELP) and promote integrated employment pathways for displaced youth, and advocate for and support access to secure legal stay arrangements. We will apply a gender-responsive approach across all ICLA programming and actively seek to change the discriminatory norms and power structures that prevent displaced women from accessing their HLP rights. Lastly, we will invest in evidence generation, learning, and impact measurement.

To get to this point, the global ICLA development strategy will focus on the workstreams below. Click on each heading to go to the respective section.

1 Embrace an enabling role to amplify effectiveness and overall impact

2 Make legal protection an integral pillar of preparedness and first-line response

3 Strengthen effective and inclusive justice systems

4 Enable stronger systems for deeper HLP impact

5 Advance ELP and integrated employment pathways for displaced youth

6 Promote legal stay as a strategic gateway for protection and durable solutions

7 Champion gender equality and inclusion that shifts power dynamics and delivers equitable and lasting outcomes

8 Strengthen ICLA's evidence base and communication of impacts

Introduction

What is the purpose of the development strategy? It shows where NRC will focus global programme development and innovation efforts, and towards what areas we will channel internal resources and global fundraising efforts in relation to the core competency (CC). The strategy covers NRC's global portfolio, therefore countries will find workstreams that are more or less relevant for their particular context.

Who is the audience? The strategy is primarily intended for the CC technical line and other relevant staff at country, regional and global level, but can also be shared externally.

Who will implement it? The global CC leads are responsible for leading the implementation of the strategy. They will engage with country colleagues, primarily through the technical line, to get input, exchange experiences, share work, conduct pilots, develop trainings and guidance, fundraise etc. This will be done both remotely and through face-to-face workshops and seminars at country, regional or global level. Global technical guidance and tools will be developed to support implementation. The strategy is ambitious and will require successful fundraising if we are to achieve all our goals.

What is expected from countries? Country offices can select the workstreams that are most relevant for them. The Response Policy provides a framework for the activities and themes falling within the scope of each CC, and countries can implement any activities within that scope that are relevant in their context. Contributions to the CC development strategies should be factored into the annual workplans of the core competency team. As guidance becomes available for new areas of work, countries are expected to follow this. Please reach out to the global lead or your global adviser if your country office is planning to do, or already doing, work or pilots in line with a workstream.

How did we arrive at these workstreams? The strategy was developed through a participatory process across the organisation. The process identified areas of work needed to: 1) address quality issues discovered through monitoring, evaluations and risk monitoring to ensure we comply with the NRC Response Policy and the quality standards we adhere to; 2) stay relevant by responding to global trends in the sector and beyond; and 3) deliver on the NRC Global Strategy.

How to reflect workstreams in CC response narratives? Country offices will be asked to identify at least three global CC workstreams in their CC response narratives, to which they will contribute during the strategic period.

What does the strategy not do? It does not: 1) set boundaries for what NRC does and does not do within a CC (see NRC Response Policy); 2) provide detailed technical guidance on how NRC will implement certain activities (see framing papers, handbooks, guidance notes); 3) promote NRC's activities and approaches (see CC advocacy plans, capacity statements, value propositions etc.).



Afghans returning from Iran arrive with almost nothing. The ICLA team is present at the border to facilitate information sessions about the importance of civil and identity documentation and how to obtain these documents. Photo: Maisam Shafiey/NRC

1 Embrace an enabling role to amplify effectiveness and overall impact

Strategic outcome:

ICLA acts as an enabler of sustainable legal protection systems by strengthening institutions, supporting local actors, leveraging KOBLI and digital transformation, and expanding technical service provision to increase the reach, quality, and long-term impact of legal protection programming for people affected by displacement.

As humanitarian needs continue to outpace available resources, NRC must increasingly complement direct service delivery with approaches that strengthen systems, institutions, and local actors. While direct legal protection services will remain essential in many contexts, greater and more sustainable impact will depend on NRC's ability to strengthen legal and administrative systems, influence laws, policies and practice, support locally led responses and enable others to deliver quality legal protection services for people affected by displacement. This shift aligns with NRC's Global Strategy commitment to locally led humanitarian outcomes.

Four strategic priority areas will underpin this shift:

- Embedding a systems approach across ICLA programming by tackling displacement-specific structural barriers to rights, combining legal protection services with policy engagement, capacity strengthening, and support to authorities and local organisations. This will advance stronger local systems that continue to serve people affected by displacement on a par with host community members and beyond humanitarian interventions, contributing to durable solutions and the humanitarian-development-peace nexus.
- Expanding KOBLI beyond NRC to offer adaptable legal protection tools to a diverse range of partners, especially local actors. Concurrently, KOBLI will continue to scale and advance digital transformation within NRC while securing a sustainable financial footing.
- Developing further ICLA's technical service provider (TSP) modality by documenting operational learning from six country pilots, diversifying funding sources, including commercial contracts, and positioning NRC as a provider of specialised legal assistance, strengthening its enabling role.
- Strengthening locally led approaches by supporting diverse partnerships (e.g. local NGOs, authorities, bar associations, grassroots organisations, and academia) while providing teams with operational direction to navigate the complexities of localisation.

Global initiatives will support these priorities by providing ICLA teams with operational guidance to adopt systems-strengthening and locally led approaches. We will implement the next phase for KOBLI and the TSP pilot in collaboration with country offices while generating learning and evidence on their effectiveness guided by the ICLA global learning agenda.



In central Mali, internally displaced people (IDPs) face major challenges accessing land, particularly women. In Tombonka near Djenné, the ICLA team supports affected families with irrigated perimeters for agricultural activities while strengthening local capacity for improved land dispute resolution and land governance. Photo: Ousmane Drabo/NRC

2 Make legal protection an integral pillar of preparedness and first-line response

Strategic outcome:

Legal protection is a default feature of NRC's emergency response architecture, ensuring people affected by displacement have access to life-saving information, counselling and legal assistance from the onset of a crisis.

Against the backdrop of the humanitarian reset, funding contractions, and sharper prioritisation processes that tend to privilege activities perceived as immediately and visibly lifesaving, it is more important than ever to ensure that legal protection is embedded within first-line and emergency response efforts. Legal protection needs can be as critical for survival as material needs. These include loss of identity and civil documents, contested HLP rights, forced evictions, and land-related risks linked to infrastructure or response sites used by other sectors. If left unaddressed at the onset of a crisis, they can have severe consequences.

Embedding legal protection as a core component of preparedness and first-line response means that ICLA programme expertise, tools and approaches are systematically integrated into every emergency mobilisation, contributing to the centrality of protection. This will equip ICLA staff and **Shelter and Settlements**, **WASH** and **Education** colleagues to identify and respond to legal protection needs and risks from day one, applying a “Solutions from the Start” approach that ensures early action supports pathways towards durable solutions. This includes understanding displaced people's intentions and future pathways from the outset, identifying potential barriers to longer-term inclusion to access services and rights, and ensuring emergency legal responses create foundations for self-reliance and durable solutions. This aligns with NRC's Global Strategy commitment to promote and deliver principled humanitarian response.

To get there, global initiatives will focus on:

- creating a catalogue and repository of programme approaches, tools, templates and SOPs for rapid deployment in new emergencies
- developing an online ICLA induction course to facilitate the rapid onboarding of staff and partners unfamiliar with ICLA programming
- leveraging KOBLI to strengthen engagement with affected populations through trusted communication channels and secure digital document storage
- exploring partnerships with law firms and academic institutions to accelerate content development for KOBLI and legal information material
- strengthening advocacy on legal protection in emergencies
- advancing integrated first-line and emergency programming approaches with **Protection from Violence (PfV)**.

3 Strengthen effective and inclusive justice systems

Strategic outcome:

Justice systems are accessible, responsive, and trusted by people affected by displacement, enabling them to resolve disputes, obtain remedies, and realise their rights while having a voice in how these processes are designed and delivered.

Access to justice is a cornerstone of the rule of law and SDG 16 on peace, justice and strong institutions. It enables people to seek remedies through formal and informal justice systems, including dispute resolution mechanisms. As a recognised leader in this field, NRC helps people affected by displacement claim their rights, resolve disputes, and pursue durable solutions. Current outcomes focus on the claiming and realisation of rights within ICLA's thematic areas, but do not capture the quality of access to justice itself, such as whether it is equitable, fair, timely and effective, or how people experience justice processes. To ensure our services respond even more to people's needs, address barriers, and strengthen agency, we should adopt a people-centred access-to-justice approach. This means ensuring people affected by displacement are active participants, not passive recipients, in decisions affecting their disputes and claims. This will require expanding the range of justice actors we work with (e.g. grassroots and refugee-led organisations) and integrating participatory and community-based approaches.

Dispute resolution is a key pathway to access to justice, helping people find remedies and prevent disputes from escalating. While collaborative dispute resolution (CDR) approaches are well established in HLP programming, the current global framework no longer reflects the expanding scope of ICLA's programming. Teams are increasingly using negotiation and mediation to address labour disputes and support community-based dispute resolution mechanisms, areas not covered by existing guidance. We also lack a framework and tools to measure outcomes of dispute resolution. Also, there is scope to strengthen collaboration with **PfV** on the design and implementation of violence reduction interventions linked to dispute resolution.

Our global initiatives will reposition ICLA programming around participatory and community-based approaches, building on and reinforcing NRC's existing community engagement and accountability (CEA) principles and commitments. Building on promising practices, we will develop practical tools and a measurement framework to support implementation, track progress, and demonstrate results. We will update global CDR guidance to reflect the expanded scope of interventions, strengthen its gender and conflict-sensitive dimensions, develop outcome monitoring tools, and explore integrated approaches with **PfV**.

4 Enable stronger systems for deeper HLP impact

Strategic outcome:

NRC has positioned HLP as a cornerstone of its response and strengthened the systems, partnerships and practices needed to secure HLP rights for people affected by displacement at scale.

Housing, land and property (HLP) rights are fundamental to protection, self-reliance and durable solutions. Barriers related to housing, land and property remain among the most significant displacement-specific obstacles, limiting access to housing, livelihoods, services, security and community inclusion. Building on its HLP expertise, NRC aims to shift from delivery to system transformation, influence practice across sectors, and deliver sustainable outcomes for people affected by displacement.

In close collaboration with **Shelter and Settlements**, **WASH**, and **PfV**, we will deliver more holistic and effective responses to HLP challenges. We will improve protection and inclusion outcomes for people affected by displacement, while deepening our engagement with legal and administrative institutions and clarifying NRC's role in supporting system-level change. A key priority will be advancing holistic, cross-sectoral approaches to forced evictions, combining legal, protection, social and housing interventions to prevent harm, protect rights and support durable solutions. We will also invest in technology to enhance HLP data management, analysis and advocacy, deepen NRC's understanding of digital land governance and its role in institutional development, and strengthen our analysis of climate-related and environmental risks affecting tenure security and HLP outcomes. Externally, we will strengthen NRC's technical leadership and visibility on HLP in the new Shelter, Land and Site Coordination (SLSC) Cluster, support locally led HLP coordination and promote shared HLP due diligence standards across the humanitarian-development nexus. Through these efforts, NRC aims to be recognised as a leader in practical and scalable approaches that place HLP at the centre of efforts to strengthen systems, address barriers and prevent vulnerabilities related to displacement, and support durable solutions.

Global initiatives will include institutionalising HLP due diligence across NRC and the nexus through capacity strengthening and advocacy, and reinforcing HLP coordination mechanisms at global and country levels through human and technical capacity. We will invest in approaches and capacity to address critical HLP challenges and risks through integrated programming, integrate climate and environmental factors into HLP assessments and programme design, and support country offices to use technology to leverage HLP data and improve programming and outcomes.



In November 2025, 27 families from Ojojona in Francisco Morazán, Honduras, received the property deeds for their homes through support from the ICLA team. Photo: Ariel Sosa/NRC



In Jordan, ICLA staff work directly with Syrian refugee agricultural workers to ensure they are informed of their rights and entitlements. In parallel, ICLA engages agricultural employers, helping them better understand and fulfil their legal responsibilities. Photo: Tina Abu Hanna/NRC

5 Advance ELP and integrated employment pathways for displaced youth

Strategic outcome:

People affected by displacement access decent work and employment opportunities and displaced youth are supported to develop skills and transition to employment through integrated programming with Education.

The employment law and procedures (ELP) thematic area remains a strategic focus area for ICLA. Programming has continued to expand into new geographic areas. It has also refined its legal protection services and developed new approaches to address increasingly complex barriers to the right to work, job opportunities, and business development. At the same time, shrinking humanitarian funding and the humanitarian-development nexus have further elevated the importance of self-reliance, economic inclusion, and access to decent work for people affected by displacement as a means of reducing aid dependency and advancing durable solutions. NRC's legal protection services play a critical role in removing the displacement-specific legal and administrative barriers that limit equal participation in national labour markets and economic activity.

Going forward, ICLA and **Education** will develop an integrated learning-to-earning framework through the Youth Education and Skills (YES!) workstream. This will link skills development, legal assistance and referrals to strengthen pathways to employment and self-reliance through meaningful youth participation and a market systems approach. We will deepen our understanding of informal work, where most people affected by displacement are engaged, but where programming and evidence gaps persist. In addition, we will invest in strengthening our understanding and use of dispute resolution within ELP interventions (see workstream 3), recognising its potential to help address labour-related disputes, and invest in data and learning to better demonstrate and improve the effectiveness of ELP programming.

To achieve this, we will work with **Education** to develop an integrated programme framework that reflects local market priorities and supports youth in navigating employment-related laws and procedures and overcoming barriers to education and employment opportunities. Other global initiatives include researching informal work and developing operational guidance, institutionalising our work on dispute resolution and self-negotiation approaches as part of ELP, and implementing the dedicated learning agenda in collaboration with country offices.

6 Promote legal stay as a strategic gateway for protection and durable solutions

Strategic outcome:

People affected by displacement are empowered to secure a legal stay in a host country and enjoy a durable solution of their choice, and are supported to navigate complex legal cases involving legal stay and legal identity.

Protection systems worldwide are under growing strain as asylum and resettlement needs increase, while respect for international protection principles declines and political pressure for more restrictive asylum policies intensifies. In this context, the concept of legal stay for refugees, asylum seekers, and others in need of protection extends beyond refugee status determination to include residency and migration pathways, as well as legal preparedness for onward movement or return. Legal stay is a foundational protection mechanism that enables access to rights and services. It safeguards individuals from refoulement and deportation and provides a strategic entry point for ICLA programming. It is also a critical enabler of self-reliance and durable solutions, opening pathways to livelihoods and participation in society.

Effective support increasingly requires cross-border approaches to address movements across jurisdictions and to navigate differing legal frameworks. We therefore seek to strengthen and systematise cross-border programming, leveraging KOBLI to facilitate information sharing, case support, and greater consistency across contexts. As legal identity is critical to accessing and regularising legal status, its integration within legal stay programming should be further strengthened, particularly in cross-border cases. Additionally, to strengthen the delivery and visibility of legal stay programming, we need a clearer understanding of ICLA's legal stay approaches and scope. We should also increase our engagement to help shape policy and practice and influence discussions on asylum, legal stay and international protection in collaboration with advocacy colleagues.

To achieve this, global initiatives will include cataloguing programme approaches and conducting systematic analysis to inform programming and advocacy, while strengthening integrated and cross-border approaches, supported by KOBLI. We will document and share lessons learned, showcase our operational expertise, and engage in relevant fora to inform policy on asylum, legal stay and international protection.

7 Champion gender equality and inclusion that shifts power dynamics and delivers equitable and lasting outcomes

Strategic outcome:

People affected by displacement – with a particular focus on displaced women and girls and their HLP rights – enjoy equitable access to rights, legal protection, and opportunities, with reduced gender inequalities and other forms of exclusion that limit their safety, participation and agency.

Gender and inclusion shape people's experiences, needs, opportunities, and exposure to risks. This is why it is essential to take them into account. Understanding these dynamics enables ICLA programmes to deliver services that are more effective, inclusive and responsive, particularly in contexts marked by displacement and significant gender inequality. While progress has been made in applying safe and inclusive programming standards, gender integration remains inconsistent. Many programmes still face challenges in setting meaningful gender targets, effectively reaching women and girls (and other vulnerable groups depending on country contexts), and tailoring approaches to ensure equitable access, participation and outcomes. We should systematically address gender-related differences in needs, risks, barriers and capacities throughout the project cycle to ensure equitable and safe access to rights and legal protection. As part of our commitment to inclusion, we will also examine how ICLA programming reaches and represents young people, to better understand and address their specific needs and barriers.

HLP rights is the thematic area where NRC has most actively addressed barriers faced by displaced women, with the ambition of achieving gender-transformative outcomes. While programmes have successfully advanced legal and policy reforms, only a few have begun addressing the restrictive social norms that often constitute the greatest obstacle to displaced women seeking redress when their rights are denied. These efforts remain ad hoc, with no systematic programming approaches or guidance in place. Going forward, this will also require a new way of working – one that places displaced women at the heart of interventions and leverages the expertise of local women's and rights organisations to bring in the gender-based violence and social norms expertise that NRC does not have.

To achieve this, global initiatives will focus on operationalising tools and guidance to address practical implementation challenges, facilitating peer-to-peer learning and exchange across ICLA teams, and strengthening staff capacity. We will pilot and research innovative and gender-transformative approaches within HLP programming for displaced women, building evidence on what works and distilling a programme design toolkit.



An ICLA staff member provides legal advice to elderly displaced people who were evacuated from Vovchansk to a collective centre in Kharkiv, Ukraine. Photo: Filippo Mancini/NRC



A refugee from Syria in Lebanon who was internally displaced due to renewed hostilities, is meeting with an ICLA lawyer at the Beddawi Youth Centre for advice on how to regularise the legal status of his wife. Photo: Grzegorz Zukowski/NRC

8 Strengthen ICLA's evidence base and communication of impacts

Strategic outcome:

ICLA systematically generates, uses and communicates credible evidence and learning in a clear and strategic way to improve programme quality and outcomes, influence policy and practice, and demonstrate impact.

Qualitative methods are often better suited to capture the changes that legal protection interventions bring about for people affected by displacement, particularly for advocacy, policy, and systems-related work. We have already taken important steps, including the development and rollout of the Advocacy Outcome Measurement Toolkit and the case study approach measuring longer-term outcomes that was piloted in the MENA region. However, we need to invest more in strategically prioritised qualitative outcome measurement and in developing innovative methodologies to capture long-term change in complex and fluid contexts. In particular, we need to better understand the key barriers faced by people affected by displacement and identify the legal protection interventions that most effectively promote inclusion in local systems, participation in decision-making, self-reliance, and durable solutions. Recognising that such outcomes often extend beyond the scope of a single programme, we will work with self-reliance/durable solutions and MEAL colleagues, other CCs, and country offices to strengthen measurement approaches.

While improving outcome measurement is critical, it is equally important to analyse and use the data we collect to strengthen learning, improve programme quality, inform advocacy, and demonstrate impact. Therefore, we will invest in capacity strengthening for ICLA teams and in technology solutions, including AI and KOBLI's legal case management module, to enhance data analysis. We will also generate ICLA reports, case studies and thematic studies more systematically to increase visibility, demonstrate impact, and influence. We will position evidence at the centre of strategic engagement and aim to reinforce ICLA's role as a technical leader.

Global initiatives will focus on strengthening ICLA staff capacity in qualitative outcome measurement, institutionalising the Advocacy Outcome Measurement Toolkit, and testing innovative approaches to measuring long-term impact. We will also invest in staff capacity and technology to strengthen data analysis and support ICLA staff in documenting and sharing results, lessons learned, and impact.



In Venezuela, ICLA provides legal support to people displaced by the 2026 earthquakes who lost their ID cards, driving licences, or disability identification cards. In coordination with the authorities, campaigns are organised to renew such identity documents, enabling access to services and social benefits. Photo: Andrea Sánchez/NRC