Transforming Energy Access



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SPOTLIGHT ON CLEAN ENERGY IN HUMANITARIAN SETTINGS

# Decarbonising Humanitarian Operations

## The case for energy-as-a-service (EaaS) models

PROSPER GLOBAL (FORMERLY MERCY CORPS)

Cover photo: J. Martin for Prosper Global

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## About THEA

This position paper was produced by the Transforming Humanitarian Energy Access (THEA) programme. THEA aims to increase access to sustainable, affordable, and inclusive energy solutions for displacement-affected communities through a combination of research, evidence generation, advocacy, and market-based energy interventions to identify and scale effective energy delivery models in humanitarian settings. The programme is funded by the UK government as part of the Transforming Energy Access platform and is implemented by Prosper Global (formerly Mercy Corps) in partnership with Ashden and the Global Platform for Action on Sustainable Energy in Displacement Settings.


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# Introduction

Access to reliable, affordable and sustainable electricity services is vital for the humanitarian aid response. Aid organisations depend on electricity for a variety of critical activities, including powering buildings, telecommunications, heating and cooling. Electricity is also crucial for water pumping and essential operations in refugee and Internally Displaced Person (IDP) camps, such as registration points, health centres, and humanitarian agencies' compounds. Many IDP and refugee camps and settlements are located in remote deep rural areas with limited or no access to the national power systems. As a result, diesel generators have become the primary source of electricity to meet these power-intensive demands.

Estimates by the GPA in 2021 suggest that seven humanitarian agencies alone collectively spend $110 million on fuel annually and emit 200,000 tonnes of $CO_2$ per year.[1] There is potential to reduce these exorbitant amounts. According to UNHCR's global strategy for sustainable energy, diesel generators commonly used in humanitarian operations are often oversized and highly expensive to run.[2] Inadequate energy efficiency standards for generators, appliances/equipment and buildings further drive up energy bills. Poor fuel consumption monitoring and limited transparency in energy expenditure lead to a lack of incentives to improve the energy performance of humanitarian operations, which results in both unnecessary costs and emissions.

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **$110M** | **200,000t** | **–31%** |
| spent on fuel annually by just seven humanitarian agencies (GPA, 2021) | of $CO_2$ emitted per year by those same agencies' operations | drop in the levelized cost of solar PV mini-grid electricity, 2018–2021 |

The sharp rise in global diesel prices in 2022 – due to the Russia-Ukraine war, global supply constraints, and increased energy demands – greatly strained humanitarian operations. This ongoing volatility and decrease in fuel availability at affordable prices, coupled with the inherent challenges of regularly transporting and securing fuel to remote locations, present significant energy security risks to humanitarian operations.

On the other hand, the global prices of solar panels and batteries have fallen significantly in the last decade, with the levelized cost of electricity in solar PV mini-grids decreasing from 0.55 kWh in 2018 by 31% to 0.38 kWh in 2021[3], and is expected to further decrease to $0.20 per kWh by 2030[4]. These decreasing costs, combined with the ability to ensure energy security by reducing reliance on transporting and securing fuel, make mini-grids an increasingly attractive solution in remote, off-grid locations.

# Barriers to the clean energy transition for humanitarian agencies

In emergency contexts, diesel generators are likely to continue to play a significant role, as they can be deployed fastest without requiring extensive project planning and design work. But for humanitarian organisations operating in protracted displacement settings, a transition to renewables-based electricity makes more sense:

- **From an environmental perspective,** it allows them to reduce their $CO_2$ emissions and avoid air and noise pollution caused by diesel generators, while contributing towards achieving Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 7.
- **From an energy security perspective,** it is beneficial as it allows agencies to reduce their dependency on fuel imports and hard currency availability.
- **From an economic point of view,** the decreasing levelized cost of electricity through renewables – especially in fully off-grid areas – combined with a decrease in capex costs by around 43% per connection since 2020 makes them an increasingly attractive solution[5].

However, a variety of barriers prevent the implementation of these renewable energy and energy efficiency measures:

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| **1** Mismatch of project timelines and humanitarian budget cycles | **2** Off-taker termination clauses |
| **3** Current procurement practices | **4** Limited private sector engagement |
| **5** Complex operational and regulatory environments | **6** Limited technical capacity and coordination |



For organisations operating in protracted displacement settings, a transition to renewable energy increasingly makes sense from an environmental, energy security, and economic perspective. Photo: J. Martin for Prosper Global

### 1. Mismatch of project timelines and humanitarian budget cycles

The provision of energy services in displacement settings has traditionally been reliant on grant funding, which ties the provision of energy to donors' contributions and their ongoing interest in the sector.[6] This dependency is particularly concerning considering current funding shortfalls and competing priorities within the humanitarian aid sector. Because of the short-term nature of their funding cycles and their reliance on securing continued grant funding, aid agencies have typically focused on procuring immediate, low-capital asset-based solutions such as diesel generators as opposed to capital-intensive renewable solutions which are much more cost effective over the long term. The large initial capital investment required for renewable energy systems is a major challenge for humanitarian agencies with unpredictable funding. Partnering with energy companies through service delivery contracts, for example a leasing or Power Purchase Agreement (PPA), allows agencies to transfer the burden of capital investment to the service providers. However, the long contracts (typically ranging between three and ten years) needed to pay back the investment and proof of financial resources needed by energy companies clashes with the annual budget cycles that are prevalent in the humanitarian sector (typically one to two years). De-risking mechanisms are therefore necessary to allow medium to long-term PPAs between the humanitarian off-takers and the private suppliers. Even where long-term agreements are not required, such as under utility-based service models, developers still need de-risking mechanisms to protect their upfront capital investments.

> **The long contracts required to pay back investment clash with the annual budget cycles prevalent in the humanitarian sector.**

### 2. Off-taker termination clauses

Early termination clauses often prevent humanitarian agencies from offering sufficient confidence and de-risking to private companies considering entering into long-term service contracts. These clauses are often included in UN agencies' contracts to protect them in case of financial shortcomings and premature contract terminations linked to their short-term funding cycles and the volatile nature of their work. This calls for de-risking mechanisms such as third-party guarantees to underwrite the termination risk on behalf of the off-takers. Various organisations are working to develop such mechanisms, such as the Decarbonising Humanitarian Energy Multi-Partner Trust Fund (featured on p. 13).

### 3. Current procurement practices

Current procurement practices of humanitarian aid agencies often do not fully assess the life cycle and operational costs of more technically complex sustainable energy systems. Humanitarian agencies frequently lack technical expertise, which leads to the exclusion of energy-as-a-service models or the procurement of more efficient, cost-effective renewable energy solutions in favour of the diesel-heavy status quo. Additionally, restrictive financial regulations prevent many agencies from exploring alternative financing strategies, such as loans, which could help fund the upfront costs of more technically complex sustainable energy systems.

### 4. Limited private sector engagement

Private sector engagement remains limited in displacement settings. This is in large part due to the perception of humanitarian contexts being temporary, even though refugee camps and the associated humanitarian operations serving them have an average lifespan of 18 years.[7] This mismatch highlights the inadequacy of short-term energy interventions in addressing the needs of long-term settlements. Further hindering private sector involvement are the remote locations of many camps, the small scale of projects, and the high overhead costs associated with operating in these areas. These factors all contribute to the perception of working in displacement settings as high-risk ventures which will not be matched by adequate remuneration of capital. Most companies have limited experience working within humanitarian contexts, leading to challenges such as differing “vocabulary” and operational risk profiles which prevent effective collaborations with humanitarian agencies.

### 5. Complex operational and regulatory environments

Operating commercially in displacement contexts is often also hindered due to regulatory constraints, such as the need to secure the necessary permits and meet legal requirements which can be time-consuming and expensive. In addition, companies face significant operational risks, including climate-related shocks, political instability, insecurity and conflict, which can disrupt supply chains, damage infrastructure, increase operating costs and undermine the commercial viability of energy investments. These barriers underline the need for a set of de-risking mechanisms such as clearer regulatory frameworks, improved coordination between humanitarian agencies and private companies, and targeted support to encourage private sector investment in sustainable and scalable energy solutions for displacement settings.

### 6. Limited technical capacity and coordination

Humanitarian agencies often face challenges in designing, tendering, financing, implementing and maintaining renewable energy projects due to limited in-house technical expertise. This lack of dedicated energy experts hinders the agencies’ ability to engage with the private sector and assess proposed solutions properly. Additionally, insufficient coordination at both the agency and sectoral levels results in missed opportunities for collaboration, economies of scale, and achieving higher impact.

CASE STUDY

## NORCAP's Energy Expert Deployment programme

NORCAP's Energy Expert Programme addresses this lack of embedded technical expertise by deploying specialised technical experts to support humanitarian, development, and government partners in improving access to clean, reliable energy in crisis and fragile settings. The programme maintains a global pool of energy professionals, ranging from engineers and renewable energy specialists to energy finance and policy experts, who are embedded within partner organisations (such as UN agencies, NGOs, and national institutions) at global, regional, and country levels. These experts provide hands-on technical assistance, capacity building, and strategic advice to help partners transition from fossil fuel–dependent systems to more sustainable, cost-effective energy solutions. They also support energy planning, system assessments, and the design and implementation of clean energy projects in complex environments. In 2025, NORCAP had a pool of 84 experts, of which 43 of them were assigned to 15 organisations in 25 countries, according to staff.

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| **84** | **43** | **25** |
| energy experts in NORCAP's global pool in 2025 | experts deployed to 15 partner organisations | countries covered by NORCAP deployments |

CASE STUDY

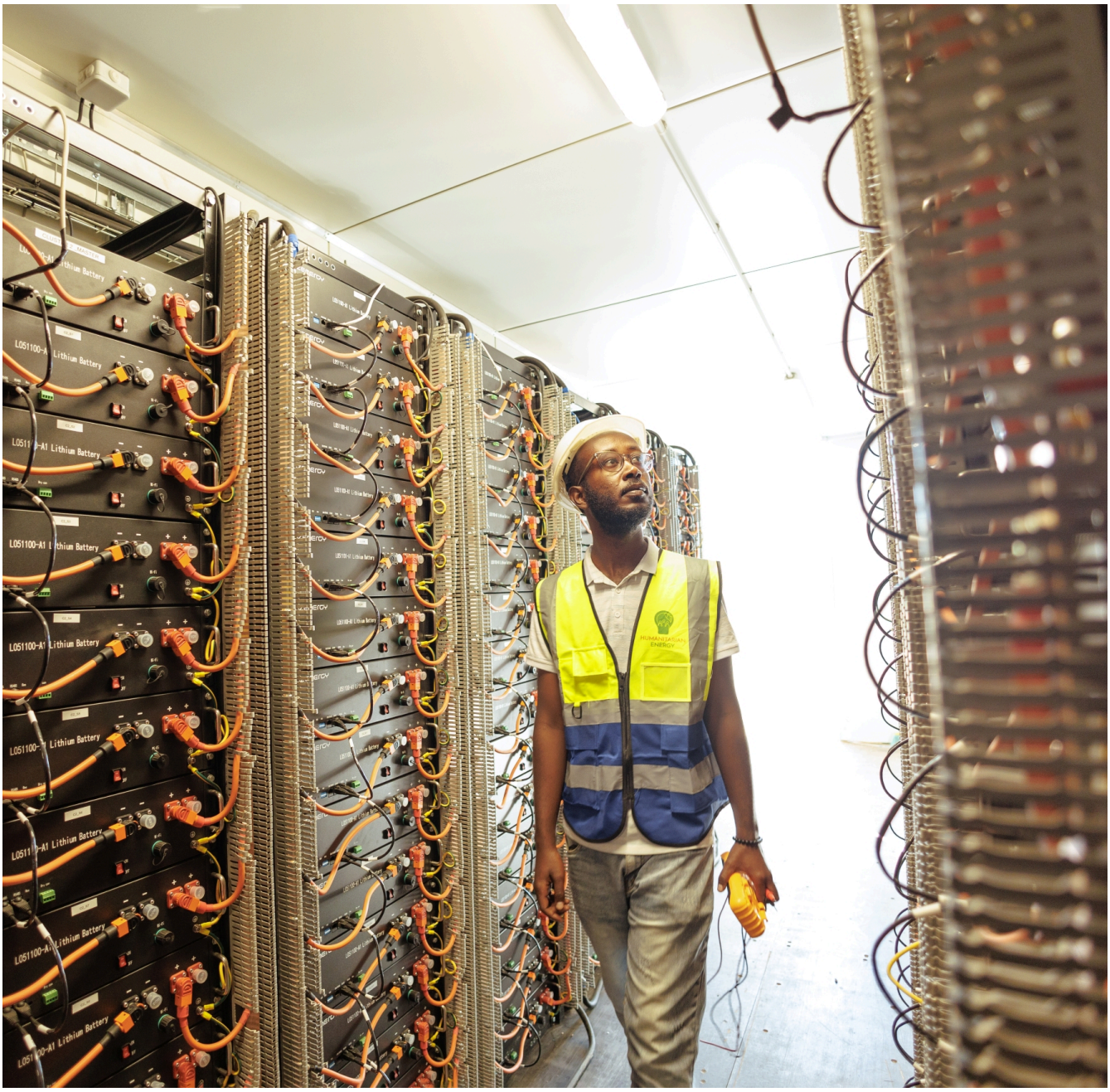
## Inter-agency coordination through the GPA

The Global Platform for Action for Sustainable Energy in Displacement Settings (GPA) has played a central role in supporting inter-agency coordination efforts to advance SDG 7 in displacement settings. The GPA connects humanitarian energy practitioners with other stakeholders, identifies areas of collaboration, and leads coordination mechanisms such as the GPA Steering Group, Humanitarian Energy Exchange Network, and other working groups and taskforces. It also plays a key role in producing research outputs and supporting advocacy efforts to support humanitarian energy mainstreaming.

# From assets to energy-as-a-service models

The current approach to procuring and distributing energy technologies is financially and environmentally unsustainable for protracted displacement settings. More sustainable systems are urgently needed which not only prioritise the provision of energy services but also consider the lifecycle of technologies and make adequate plans for operations and maintenance.

Energy-as-a-service (EaaS) models allow agencies to simply pay for the electricity they need, avoiding the need for high upfront capital investment, technical expertise, or complex procurement processes. The private developer is responsible for the energy system which it owns and operates, and is incentivised to provide the most efficient service for maximum revenues.



Under energy-as-a-service models, providers design, finance, own and operate renewable energy and storage assets on behalf of agencies and the communities around them. Photo: J. Martin for Prosper Global

## Key advantages of EaaS models

EaaS models let humanitarian agencies engage the private sector to overcome high capital costs, limited expertise and short budget cycles in the deployment of clean and sustainable energy systems. Their main advantages:

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| **Limited upfront investment** | Agencies pay regular service fees or per kWh instead of buying infrastructure, giving predictable cash flow and freeing capital for other interventions – while the provider raises the capex and brings faster, more cost-effective procurement. |
| **Professional operations & maintenance** | The provider designs, installs, operates and maintains the system, ensuring higher long-run service quality and removing the technical burden from agencies that may lack in-house expertise. |
| **Tailored energy supply** | Providers assess, design and size systems to actual demand, avoiding under- and over-capacity and creating the potential to extend services to surrounding households and businesses. |
| **System optimisation & innovation** | To stay competitive, providers are incentivised to adopt efficient, cutting-edge technologies – speeding up the deployment of optimised renewable solutions in displacement settings. |

## Key challenges of EaaS models

The same models carry trade-offs that agencies and donors need to plan for:

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| **Long-term contractual engagement** | Leasing and PPAs make renewables accessible in the short term, but require a longer-term contractual engagement to pay back the investment, which is not always compatible with UN agencies' funding cycles. |
| **Need for de-risking & guarantees** | Inherent financial and operational risks mean agencies and donors must de-risk investment through guarantees, insurance or blended finance – mechanisms that specifically need to address early-termination clauses. |

Adopting EaaS models will require a coordinated push of donors, investors, and other funding agencies to champion the shift to renewable energy on EaaS models. Their commitment can drive demand and spur innovation by explicitly prioritising and financing sustainable energy solutions in humanitarian operations. It will also require the establishment and adoption of standardised procurement frameworks and service contract tailored for renewable energy projects to streamline the procurement process, enhance transparency, and reduce transaction costs for all stakeholders. In addition, creating shared de-risking mechanisms–such as pooled funds, guarantees, or risk-sharing facilities–can reduce the perceived and actual risks associated with renewable energy projects, and support their more widespread implementation in displacement settings. Other opportunities to bring down costs for renewable energy projects, for example tax exemptions which humanitarian agencies may qualify for, should also be leveraged. Strengthening communication and partnerships between humanitarian agencies and private companies will be critical to support this shift.

# Examples of EaaS models and renewable energy funds in humanitarian settings

## Examples of EaaS models in humanitarian settings

### Humanitarian Hub in South Sudan | IOM

IOM manages the Malakal Humanitarian Hub which provides secure accommodation, workspace and connectivity to around 300 humanitarian aid workers from 34 different aid organisations in Malakal, South Sudan.[8] Previously, the hub relied entirely on diesel, costing as much as $4.9 per litre (of which $3 per litre was due to air transport because it was not possible to reach the site by road). This created challenges such as fuel supply risks, poor air quality, high noise levels, and significant costs and carbon emissions. To reduce these issues, IOM explored options for transitioning to clean energy. In 2019, the agency entered a 10-year Power Purchase Agreement (PPA) with a lease-to-own clause with Scatec Solar, a project developer and independent power producer. Scatec Solar installed a 705kWp solar PV and 1,596 kWh battery system to meet part of the agency's energy needs. To overcome the commercial barriers of the project, IOM used a grant of $300,000 from the UK government to kickstart the project, with the remaining capital investment covered by SCATEC, including O&M. SCATEC charges IOM on a kWh basis for the service to recover its capital investment.

As of 2021, the solar installation has resulted in a 66% reduction of fuel consumption, equivalent to around 292,000 litres annually which translates to 777 tonnes of $CO_2$ emissions reductions per year (about 1.5% of IOM's global emissions). IOM has also leveraged the clean energy produced by the solar system to extend the environmental benefits to the local community using an innovative financing mechanism called the Peace Renewable Energy Certificate (P-REC). For the first time in the UN system, P-RECs were used to generate additional funds to support the solarization of two nearby hospitals. As a result, over 180,000 local community members now benefit from reliable, 24/7 electricity for healthcare services.

### UNSOS PPA | Kube Energy

In 2023, MIGA issued a 15-year guarantee of $5.67 million to Kube Energy for its equity investment into a solar PV hybrid power plant project in Baidoa, Somalia. The plant provides 24/7 electricity to the United Nations Support Office in Somalia (UNSOS) through a power purchase agreement (PPA). The project is replacing diesel generators, cutting greenhouse gas emissions and electricity costs while improving supply reliability within the green zone. Partnering with a creditworthy off-taker like the UN facilitates investment in clean, modern energy infrastructure, helping overcome a major barrier to renewable energy deployment in conflict-affected settings. The UNSOS PPA also lays the groundwork for extending clean energy access to nearby NGOs and government offices. Under a Memorandum of Understanding with the South-West State of Somalia, ownership of the power plant will transfer to the local government after 15 years of commercial operation. MIGA's risk exposure under the guarantee is shared with the IDA Private Sector Window and the Renewable Energy Catalyst Trust Fund.

### Humanitarian Utility Model for Energy (HUME) pilot project | A2EI and GPA

To accelerate the transition away from diesel dependence in humanitarian settings, the Humanitarian Utility Model for Energy (HUME) project is piloting an innovative Energy-as-a-Service approach with UN agencies. Funded through the Transforming Energy Access programme, ZE-Gen, and implemented by A2EI and the GPA, the model provides reliable, zero-emission energy without requiring upfront capital investment, in-house engineering expertise, or responsibility for operations and maintenance. By pooling revenue across multiple installations, HUME aims to de-risk investment in solar energy systems and demonstrate a viable pathway for scaling clean energy across displacement settings. The first pilot installation for UNICEF in Chad is expected to save approximately $900k USD in fuel and energy costs while avoiding more than 2,000 tonnes of $CO_2$ emissions over 10 years. While the pilot currently replaces a single diesel generator, its success could have transformative implications for the humanitarian sector, where more than 10,000 fossil fuel generators remain in use, offering a scalable model to significantly reduce fuel expenditure, emissions, and operational risks.



Operational solarisation in practice: engineers survey a ground-mounted solar array. Photo: J. Martin for Prosper Global

## Funds for decarbonising humanitarian operations

*The funds listed in this section mostly aim to support the procurement of clean energy assets as opposed to energy-as-a-service models.*

### Capital Fund | NRC

The Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) has launched an initiative to solarise its field operations through a new revolving Capital Fund which has been established in partnership with the Clinton Global Initiative (CGI).[9] The fund is legally held by NRC and combines grants, loans from private and institutional investors, and NRC's own reserves. In an initial phase, loans will be provided to NRC's field offices to finance the replacement of diesel generators through solar PV systems. These loans will be repaid through internal financing mechanisms linked to short-term donor funding, with NRC's head office guaranteeing repayment. Priority will be given to grants and zero-interest loans. In future phases, the fund aims to expand to other capital-intensive services such as water, sanitation, housing, and connectivity, and to increase economic opportunities for refugee businesses.[10]

### Climate and Environment Transition Fund | ICRC

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has established a Climate and Environment Transition Fund to support reaching its climate goals and to enhance the environmental sustainability of its operations.[11] The Fund will support the solarisation of ICRC's priority sites across seven countries. Other initiatives will aim to integrate climate and environmental risks into ICRC programs and operations, to maximise the environmental sustainability of its operations, and to support communities with climate adaptation and mitigation measures. Through an upfront investment of 15.3 million Swiss francs, the organisation expects to save up to 140,000 tonnes of $CO_2$ emissions over 20 years. The organisation also expects to save 30-50 million Swiss francs over the same time period which can be used for other humanitarian activities. The fund is designed as a multi-year vehicle and combines grants from public, private, and philanthropic sources, in addition to a seed loan from ICRC's own financial resources. A repayment and replenishment mechanism will be explored to sustain the fund, as well as the option to open the fund to private investment.

### Green Financing Facility | UNHCR

The Green Financing Facility (GFF) is an innovative financing mechanism that supports UNHCR and other UN agencies in their transition to sustainable energy. Active since 2020, the GFF is fully funded with support from the IKEA Foundation, the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) and the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida). With a capitalisation of $34 million it established a revolving fund mechanism to cover up-front investment into sustainable energy assets which are recouped through savings from future energy costs. The investments cover solarisation projects for offices and refugee-facing infrastructure as well as generator efficiency initiatives – all targeted to reduce operational costs and emissions.

By April 2026, 20 systems are operational across 9 countries, translating to 3.5 MWp of installed PV capacity and 7 MWh of battery storage, 3 GWh of generated renewable energy, and 3,000 tons of avoided $CO_2$eq since the first systems came online in 2024. The project aims to positively influence market development for solar energy in high-risk markets by supporting open, competitive procurement processes for commercially viable contracts, while ensuring technical quality assurance of sustainable energy assets in the field through long-term asset ownership and sustainable financing.

### Decarbonisation Fund | WFP

The World Food Programme (WFP) launched its Energy Efficiency Programme (EEP) in 2012 to provide grants to divisions and country offices for energy efficiency measures or reducing the use of fossil fuels.[12] Applicants can seek funding by submitting project proposals that implement energy efficiency measures or replace diesel generators with renewable energy systems. These proposed projects need to demonstrate their ability to save 20 tonnes of $CO_2$ a year, with the EEP covering up to 75% of the total costs. The proposals are ranked based on objective criteria to prioritise the most impactful and feasible projects. The programme has since been bolstered through the creation of a Decarbonisation Fund which collects revenue from internal carbon taxes on the use of vehicles and commercial air travel. These taxes are expected to generate an annual revenue of $2 million, with $50 charged per tonne of $CO_2$ emitted. External donors and partners can also contribute to supplement the fund, to which Hyundai Motor Company has since made a $2 million donation. Since 2022, WFP has implemented projects in 25 countries, installing around 3.5 MW of solar power at offices, warehouses, and UNHRD depots, as well as EV charging stations. Energy monitoring is expanding to 150 locations by the end of 2025. WFP needs $3.3 – 3.9 M annually to meet 2030 targets, with current funding at $1.5m, and is exploring carbon finance as well as seeking partners in the private sector and within UN agencies, academia, and others to expand impact, and technical support to scale efforts.

### Decarbonising Humanitarian Energy Multi-Partner Trust Fund | GPA, UNDP, NORCAP

The Decarbonising Humanitarian Energy (DHE) Multi-Partner Trust Fund (MPTF) is a pooled funding mechanism established at the end of 2022 by UNITAR via the Global Platform for Action on Sustainable Energy in Displacement Settings (GPA), UNDP, and NORCAP (part of the Norwegian Refugee Council), with $22 million seed funding from the German Federal Foreign Office (GFFO) through the International Climate Initiative (IKI). The Fund aims to mobilise and strategically allocate resources to develop, pilot, demonstrate, and scale context-appropriate, and increasingly market-based, delivery models and innovative financing schemes that move beyond traditional fully grant-based approaches, while strengthening market systems and the enabling conditions needed to deploy sustainable energy solutions.

# Looking ahead

Adopting EaaS models in humanitarian contexts can transform energy provision, shifting from reactive, fossil-fuel-dependent systems to proactive, sustainable solutions. It requires bold shifts in mindset and practice, but the long-term benefits in terms of cost savings, sustainability, and quality of service make it a critical step toward more effective and impactful humanitarian interventions. By leveraging partnerships with private energy providers, humanitarian agencies can enhance efficiency, reduce environmental impact, and improve service delivery, ultimately creating more resilient and sustainable energy systems for displaced populations.

Realising this potential at scale will also require greater collaboration between humanitarian actors, donors, development finance institutions, and the private sector. Bringing together a broader range of funders and investors to develop de-risking mechanisms, blended finance approaches, and capital expenditure (CAPEX) funds will be essential to improve the bankability of EaaS projects and enable the model to be rolled out more widely across humanitarian settings.

> **The long-term benefits — in cost savings, sustainability, and quality of service — make EaaS a critical step toward more effective and impactful humanitarian interventions.**



Shifting from reactive, fossil-fuel-dependent systems to proactive, sustainable solutions. Photo: J. Martin for Prosper Global

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## About Prosper Global

In a world where short term relief efforts are often seen as the best we can do, Prosper Global (formerly Mercy Corps) confronts both the most urgent challenges we face and the conditions that cause them.

By fusing local know-how with entrepreneurial ambition, we develop what's needed, and scale what's proven, to create opportunities for all to pursue a full life.


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