



UNHCR Country Portfolio Evaluations: Afghanistan, Angola, Iraq, Morocco

**SYNTHESIS REPORT
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UNHCR Evaluation Service

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List of abbreviations

CO	Country Operation
CRRF	Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework
GCR	Global Compact on Refugees
HCT	Humanitarian Country Team
IGA	Income Generating Activities
KRI	Kurdistan Region of Iraq
NSIA	Morocco National Strategy for Immigration and Asylum
POC	Persons of Concern
RCM	Refugee Coordination Model
3RP	Refugee Response and Resilience Plan
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNDAF	United Nations Development Assistance Framework
UNSDCF	United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework

Summary of core findings

Protection

- UNHCR had shown strong leadership in the refugee protection space, and its technical expertise in this area is widely recognised. In responses aimed at internally displaced persons (IDPs), it has invested considerable resources in protection cluster leadership and coordination. This area of activity is time- and personnel-intensive and may have implied a trade-off with more strategic-level engagement and the achievement of a catalyst role on durable solutions.
- Across the four countries examined, UNHCR's advocacy activities have had variable results. In some instances, its extensive presence across the cluster system has given it a platform to relay its advocacy messages. In others, the complexity of inter-cluster decision-making processes, as well as humanitarian country team (HCT) governance practice and the fact that UNHCR does not have a mandate for IDPs, have all contributed to dampening the thrust of its advocacy messaging. This has caused a number of external stakeholders, including some donors, to view some UNHCR advocacy efforts as lacking in drive and determination.

Responding in emergencies and beyond

- Sudden-onset waves of displacement in protracted crises point to the importance of preparedness and ongoing risk analysis. This is also true in less fragile environments.
- In mixed situations especially, such as in Afghanistan and Iraq, a tension exists between status- and needs-based approaches to targeting and prioritisation. UNHCR's obligation to honour its refugee mandate, together with its commitment to protecting and assisting IDPs, adds up to ambitious and very broad-ranged country operational plans. This has been compounded by the adoption of the Global Compact on Refugees, which has brought new momentum to UNHCR's focus on sustainability and solutions¹ and has led it to further extend the scope of its operations beyond its core areas of competence.
- Even if UNHCR attempts to address this latter area of focus through partnerships with development actors, its field of operational intervention is vast and varied. Aside from questions of resource allocation, this also raises issues of strategic coherence across diverse and potentially disparate country programmes.

Promoting inclusion and self-reliance, also through development actors

- The evaluations found some evidence of good outcomes in UNHCR support of livelihoods activities. However, progress towards more ambitious goals of employability and self-reliance has been modest, even in relatively favourable contexts such as Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) and Morocco.
- Challenges posed by the socio-economic context in host countries and areas of return, including limited private sector development, depressed job markets, and cultural and other barriers to social cohesion, continue to

¹ Although UNHCR's focus on sustainability and solutions is not new, it has been given renewed momentum by the Global Compact on Refugees and, internally, the Strategic Directions (2017-2021).

hamper UNHCR efforts aimed at inclusion and self-reliance, including those involving partnerships with private sector actors.

The empowerment of people UNHCR serves

- The ability of UNHCR to identify, reach and engage with the most vulnerable is often hampered by contextual factors, such as security and access constraints, or the lack of government regulatory frameworks for protection and the assistance of vulnerable groups. In some instances, participatory approaches involving a transfer of programme responsibility to local stakeholders, including national NGOs, is made difficult by UNHCR's low risk appetite and restrictive approach to financial risk management.

The pursuit of solutions

- UNHCR has played an active role in development coordination processes, such as United Nations Development Assistance Framework (UNDAF) and United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (UNSDCF). It has also engaged in more ad hoc consultations with development partners, in an attempt to secure their cooperation in protection-related systems-building, and to advance economic and local integration goals for refugees and IDPs. For a number of reasons that warrant further research, these attempts at operations-level cooperation across the humanitarian/development gap have, to date, yielded modest outcomes in Afghanistan and Iraq. At least in part, this may owe to the limited operational footprint of development actors in complex emergencies.
- In Afghanistan and Iraq, UNHCR's ability to play a catalytic role is also challenged by its stretched capacity in trying to respond to immense needs, including as a provider of last resort, and in firefighting to fill urgent provision gaps. These conditions do not lend themselves well to strategic planning and reflection on long-term programme trajectories aimed at lasting solutions.

1. Aim and Introduction

This synthesis report covers a series of independent evaluations of UNHCR Country Operations (CO) in Afghanistan, Angola, Iraq and Morocco in 2019-2020.

The purpose of these evaluations was to generate timely evidence to inform UNHCR's future operational planning and strategy in the four country contexts and beyond. The evaluations had a primarily learning function. They sought to inform decisions to strengthen partnerships and programme design in the pursuit of assistance, protection and solutions for UNHCR Persons of Concern (PoC) and the communities that host them. In addition, they sought to analyse and assess the effectiveness of UNHCR's plans and activities in light of the country context, and the evolving needs of the population and national governments.

The primary audience for the evaluations were UNHCR COs in Afghanistan, Angola, Iraq and Morocco and relevant Regional Offices. Other UNHCR Bureaux and Divisions, Government actors and UNHCR partners, including humanitarian and development actors, constituted a secondary audience.

The objectives of the four CO evaluations were framed around the following three key areas of enquiry²:

- 1) Results achieved and contributing factors
- 2) Strategic positioning and coherence
- 3) Future directions

1.1. Methodology

The evaluations used a predominantly qualitative data collection approach that combined desk research, key informant interviews and focus group discussions with a wide range of stakeholders including UNHCR and implementing partner staff, representatives of governments, UN agencies, NGOs, World Bank, and several others.

This synthesis report focuses on the main findings that have emerged from the four evaluation reports and uses the five UNHCR's Strategic Directions 2017–2021³ as the analytical framework. Where relevant, insights on progress towards the objectives of the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR)⁴ have also been included under each of the strategic directions. Where applicable, the main findings emerging from the evaluation reports have been grounded in an analysis of the internal (internal to UNHCR, related to strategic and programmatic areas) and external (external to UNHCR, related to the operating environment) factors affecting results.

² For each area of enquiry, relevant and contextualized sub-questions were developed.

³ The five UNHCR's Strategic Directions 2017–2021 have been elaborated to shape UNHCR work and core directions and are: 1) protection; 2) responding in emergencies and beyond; 3) promoting inclusion and self-reliance, including through the engagement of development actors; 4) the empowerment of the people UNHCR serves; and 5) the pursuit of solutions. See <https://www.unhcr.org/5894558d4.pdf>

⁴ The GCR consists of a framework for more predictable and equitable responsibility-sharing, recognizing that a sustainable solution to refugee situations cannot be achieved without international cooperation. The GCR is articulated across four objectives: 1) Ease the pressures on host countries; 2) Enhance refugee self-reliance; 3) Expand access to third-country solutions; 4) Support conditions in countries of origin for return in safety and dignity. <https://www.globalcompactrefugees.org/>

1.2. Context of country operations

The four countries covered by this synthesis report (Afghanistan, Angola, Iraq, Morocco) can be placed in two broad categories. Angola and Morocco, which make up the first of these, are defined by a generally stable operating environment broadly conducive to linkages between humanitarian and development programming. In both countries, UNHCR has comparatively small caseloads (around 80,658⁵ PoCs in Angola, and nearly 9,000⁶ in Morocco). Although protection and integration challenges for refugees and asylum seekers in Angola and Morocco are very real, they are not as acute as those commonly faced by PoCs in large-scale complex emergencies such as Afghanistan and Iraq. In Morocco, UNHCR cooperates closely with the host government, within the framework of its National Strategy on Immigration and Asylum (NSIA) which is aligned with the GCR. In Angola, the legal and policy context for UNHCR's engagement with the host government is more challenging, as is the protection environment. Nonetheless, in both Angola and Morocco, UNHCR can act as a catalyst for durable solutions and build on the work and achievements of development counterparts.

In contrast, Afghanistan and Iraq fall squarely in the category of complex emergencies. UNHCR's caseloads in both countries are extremely large (around 2,700,000 PoCs⁷ in Afghanistan, and a staggering 6,286,000 PoCs⁸ in Iraq). While the transition is central to the aid narrative in both countries, humanitarian needs in these contexts are still acute and development goals remain distant. Efforts to shift to long-term programming and durable solutions have been hampered by chronic insecurity, limited government capacity, the continued need to address urgent humanitarian needs, and the relatively scarce presence of development partners on the ground. In Iraq, this picture must be nuanced with the semi-autonomous KRI, whose relatively stable security environment and comparatively well-functioning regional government distinguish it from the rest of the country.

⁵ As of November 2015, there were 45,658 PoC in Angola, of whom 15,572 were refugees and 30,086 asylum seekers. The influx of Kasai refugees from DRC in 2017 added around 35,000 refugees to this caseload.

⁶ As of May 2019, there were a total of 8,994 PoCs in Morocco, of which 2,505 were asylum-seekers and 6,489 refugees.

⁷ As of the end of 2018, there were 2,759,010 PoCs living in Afghanistan, the majority of which, 76% (2,106,893) were IDPs, followed by 17% (489,854) 'others of concern', and 7% returnee refugees.

⁸ As of January 2020, there were 1.4m IDPs and 4.6m IDP returnees living in Iraq. Refugees living in Iraq numbered 286,949 as of January 2020, the overwhelming majority of which – 245,810 – are from Syria and live in KRI.

2. Key Findings across UNHCR's Strategic Directions 2017–2021

2.1. Protection

Main points

- UNHCR has asserted strategic leadership over the protection space in refugee responses and has shown strong technical expertise in protection.
- In Iraq and Afghanistan UNHCR has invested substantial staff and resources in humanitarian coordination mechanisms, and its leadership of the protection cluster in these contexts is effective. Its investments and prominent role in coordination, however, might have implied a degree of over-stretch at the expense of more strategic-level engagement and a catalyst role on durable solutions.
- UNHCR has played an active role also in development coordination mechanisms. Weaknesses in these arrangements in Iraq and Afghanistan point to the practical challenges that COs are faced with when trying to meaningfully engage development partners in complex emergencies. In both countries UNHCR has relied on *ad hoc*, informal consultations with development actors to advance protection, local integration and self-reliance.
- The effectiveness of advocacy activities mounted by the four COs is variable and highly dependent on the external environment. In some cases, UNHCR has leveraged its leadership, coordination role and technical expertise to effectively drive forward advocacy for protection, in others it has shown hesitation and an over-cautious approach.
- UNHCR has engaged in sustained, much-needed capacity-building efforts targeting national and local level government authorities in charge of managing displaced populations. The success of these efforts is heavily dependent on the operational environment, including the geopolitical situation and the host government's political objectives regarding the displaced.
- Greater advocacy and capacity-building gains could be achieved by adopting a more strategic outlook, involving better attention to the political dynamics at play among UNHCR's key government partners and audiences.

Exercising leadership and coordination in protection

UNHCR's strong technical expertise in the delivery of protection and services to PoCs is widely recognised.

In all four evaluation contexts, external stakeholders saw UNHCR as offering robust sectoral expertise and having the capacity to effectively deliver a wide range of activities pertinent to its mandate, including camp management, protection monitoring, status determination, and advocacy. Also, strong operational capacity to implement large-scale cash-based interventions⁹ was demonstrated in Afghanistan, where UNHCR implements reintegration grants for returnees, and in Iraq, where IDPs and refugees are targeted with multipurpose cash assistance. The agency was also playing a key role in the provision of strategic direction for cash transfer programming and approaches, for example through co-leadership of the Cash Working Group in Iraq.

UNHCR has asserted its strategic leadership over the protection space in refugee responses. In all four countries under review, UNHCR's identity as the mandated agency to lead refugee responses was widely recognised by external stakeholders. This echoes the findings of the Multilateral Organisation Performance Network (MOPAN)

⁹ Also in line with UNHCR Policy on Cash-based Interventions (CBI) <https://cms.emergency.unhcr.org/documents/11982/159474/UNHCR%2C+Policy+on+Cash-Based+Interventions/89b1c28c-fb3e-43c1-bd3d-84dd964b566a>

Assessment of UNHCR 2017-18, according to which UNHCR had “strong organisational identity and shared understanding of the organisation’s *raison d’être*” (MOPAN, 2019). UNHCR was seen as capable of asserting its strategic leadership role, thanks to its strong technical expertise and operational capacity, which were instrumental in lending credibility to the agency. In general, UNHCR’s senior management was also perceived as having the required executive weight and credibility to exercise leadership over the protection space and engage with authority with governments and other partners (e.g. the Humanitarian Country Teams) to advocate and guide the response.

Country-level refugee and humanitarian coordination arrangements vary greatly from country to country, with their effectiveness largely dependent on the context. At one end of the spectrum is Iraq, where dense and complex humanitarian coordination mechanisms have long been in place, reflecting the protracted nature of the humanitarian and refugee responses there. The Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) cluster approach and, more recently, the Refugee Response and Resilience Plan (3RP) for the coordination of the Syrian refugee response, are key components of the local coordination architecture. In KRI, which hosts both IDPs and refugees, coordination arrangements for mixed situations were widely described as overly complex by respondents in the evaluation. At the other end of the spectrum is Morocco’s developing country context, where coordination structures are limited to Protection Working Groups¹⁰ and the inter-ministerial coordination mechanism for the implementation of the NSIA. In between these two ends of the spectrum there is Afghanistan, where coordination arrangements face broadly similar challenges to those in Iraq; and Angola, where a relatively small-scale mechanism similar to the Refugee Coordination Model (RCM) has been in place since 2017.

In Iraq and Afghanistan, UNHCR has performed a prominent and effective role in humanitarian coordination. In Iraq, UNHCR has invested substantial time, staff and resources in coordination arrangements: it co-leads the protection cluster - the largest cluster in the country, and its four sub-clusters¹¹, as well as the 3RP. Interviews with external stakeholders pointed to largely positive perceptions of the effectiveness of UNHCR’s coordination style, with UNHCR protection cluster and sub-cluster leads often described as effective and forward-leaning. UNHCR’s broad-based presence across the cluster system in Iraq and Afghanistan has given the agency a particularly strong voice. However, as discussed below, UNHCR has not always leveraged this influence very effectively to advance advocacy messages. Its substantial investments in coordination structures in these contexts may also have implied a degree of over-stretch, and a trade-off at the expense of more strategic-level engagement and a catalyst role on durable solutions. This is discussed further below.

In addition to humanitarian coordination, UNHCR has also played an active role in development coordination mechanisms; weaknesses in these mechanisms, however, have prompted UNHCR to also rely on more ad hoc, informal consultations with development actors to advance protection, integration and self-reliance. In Afghanistan, the UN’s Development Assistance Framework (UNDAF) and One UN Framework have provided some basis for UNHCR’s engagement with development partners. In Iraq, the UN Sustainable Development Cooperation

¹⁰ Protection Working Groups are platforms that have been set up by UNHCR, implementing partners and other CSOs working on human rights and the protection of PoCs with main objectives of coordination and information-sharing, identification and referral of PoC, and provision of assistance to the most vulnerable cases.

¹¹ The four sub-clusters are Child Protection; Gender-based Violence; Housing, Land and Property; and Mine Action.

Framework (UNSDCF)¹² has served the same purpose. Similarly, in Morocco UNHCR is part of the UNDAF to enable the integration of asylum and refugee protection issues into the Framework.

In Afghanistan and Iraq, there was a sense that existing development coordination platforms were not living up to expectations. In Afghanistan, their effectiveness in bringing together UN actors was questioned, also in light of the different – at times incompatible- operational and funding modalities that guide the work of humanitarian and development actors. In Iraq, the participation of relevant federal line ministries in the UNSDCF process has been extremely limited, and the majority of stakeholders viewed prospects for the success of the UNSDCF as very limited. The challenges surrounding formal coordination arrangements such as the UNSDCF are at the heart of the practical obstacles that COs often face in meaningfully engaging and coordinating with development actors, with a view to handing over refugee and other PoCs caseloads, improving protection outcomes, and working jointly to find concrete pathways for self-reliance and integration. The findings of evaluations in Iraq and Afghanistan also indicate that in the absence of effective and well-functioning formal mechanisms for coordination, COs are relying on more *ad hoc*, informal engagement with development partners. In Iraq for example, UNHCR facilitated the World Bank's access to caseload data, to help it in its analytics and assessment work. It has also worked closely with the Bank on the development of a targeting tool for use in both humanitarian and development programmes. These efforts reflect a forward-leaning and innovative approach to cooperation and have clearly produced positive results. On the whole, however, they remain relatively limited in the scale of their impact.

Advocacy for protection and capacity-building of national actors

Several advocacy initiatives have been mounted by the four COs to champion causes on behalf of PoCs.

UNHCR has been proactive in its leadership of advocacy efforts to influence relevant government ministries and international actors (e.g. the HCT) on issues related to durable solutions, law and policy development, and context-specific protection concerns arising in country. A case in point is the advocacy drive led by UNHCR around the Iraqi federal government's unexpected order, in 2019, to close IDP camps in the Ninewa governorate. In this specific case, in which the order contravened the government's own stated policies, UNHCR's advocacy work proved more effective at the sub-national than at the national level. Barriers to success in advocacy at the national level included difficulties in achieving HCT-wide consensus on public messaging.

The effectiveness of advocacy activities is variable. In some instances, UNHCR has been a determined and resolute leader in protection advocacy, and some initiatives have succeeded in influencing government's policies and practices, ultimately leading to better protection outcomes for PoCs. In Morocco, for example, UNHCR's protection advocacy has helped to achieve the inclusion of refugees in two regularization campaigns for migrants in irregular situations. Since 2014, the secondment of a UNHCR staff to the Ministry for Moroccans Living Abroad and Migration Affairs¹³, to support the NSIA, was also found to have produced benefits in terms of UNHCR advocacy and

¹² In 2019 UNDAF has been renamed UNSDCF. See <http://www.unevaluation.org/document/download/2966>

¹³ In French, Ministère Délégué Chargé des Marocains Résidant à l'Étranger et des Affaires de la Migration (MDCMREAM).

positioning. In Afghanistan, UNHCR has been instrumental in ensuring that special attention was given to the returnee and IDP agenda in both the UNDAF and the One-UN Framework.

There are cases where UNHCR has shown hesitation in driving forward advocacy messages. In Angola, an over-cautious approach with the government was noted in the evaluation, with UNHCR refraining from questioning the government's restrictive stance on issues related to the protection of refugees and asylum seekers, which departed from international commitments and the spirit of domestic laws. In Iraq, UNHCR's prominent role in cluster coordination gave it a firm platform for advocacy. Some observers, however, felt that it had yielded too quickly to the divergent views of the Resident Coordinator/Humanitarian Coordinator. In the face of highly complex protection challenges, such as those presented by IDPs with perceived affiliations with the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant at al-Karama camp, some stakeholders struggled to understand UNHCR's advocacy messages and expressed the wish that UNHCR had engaged with them more on the technical aspects of protection issues.

Significant capacity and commitment gaps of national governments for the management of displaced populations were evidenced across all evaluations. Findings across the four country contexts point to a disconnect between the role of national and international legal frameworks governing forced displacement, and the reality of their enactment on the ground. In Angola, for example, an adverse protection environment prevails, in which urban refugees are confronted with serious discrimination and protection challenges in accessing education, livelihoods and employment opportunities. This goes counter to the country's international commitments and domestic laws. In Iraq, national legislation and policy frameworks governing IDP affairs are not backed by political will or enforcement capacity on the part of the relevant authorities. The dignified and safe return of millions of IDPs to their areas of origin continues to be hampered as a result. Where such disparities exist between the formal commitments of a host government and its actual stance or actions (or inactions) on the ground, UNHCR's protection, advocacy and engagement strategies need to be informed by a clear-eyed analysis of the situation. In Iraq, there were signs that this analysis was at times coloured by a degree of optimism bias, particularly with regards to prospects for a successful transition from emergency to recovery and development programmes.

UNHCR has engaged in sustained, much-needed efforts to address capacity gaps through targeted activities aimed at national and local level government authorities in charge of managing displaced populations. The significant commitment and capacity gaps discussed above can, at least in part, be addressed with capacity-building activities. UNHCR is well-placed to provide support in this area, by leveraging its mandate, leadership and technical expertise. Related activities are further justified in the context of the GCR, which places host governments at the centre of refugee responses and durable solutions. Examples of capacity-building activities supported by UNHCR in the countries under review are wide-ranging. They include the secondment of a UNHCR expert on local integration with the relevant Ministry in Morocco¹⁴ to assist in the implementation of the NSIA, and in Iraq strengthening the capacity of the Federal Ministry of the Interior to issue civil documentation to IDPs. Also, in KRI, UNHCR provides training for social workers¹⁵, based on a diagnosis study of capacity building needs conducted in 2019. Alongside

¹⁴ *The Delegated Ministry for Moroccans Living Abroad and Migration.*

¹⁵ *Of the Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs.*

these operations-based activities, UNHCR also provides legal advisory support on the development of national protection frameworks and legislation, such as the Solution Strategy for Afghan Refugees in Afghanistan, supporting the development of a national asylum system in Morocco, of the Asylum Law in Afghanistan and Morocco, and of the Refugee Law in Iraq.

On capacity-building, among other activities, there is a tendency to report progress against outputs or relatively short-term outcomes. Across the four countries covered, capacity-building interventions tend to be decided primarily on the basis of UNHCR's mandate, with limited consideration given to risks and the likelihood of successful outcomes. However, assessing longer-term outcomes and impact-level results is especially critical in the area of capacity-building, where substantive results can only be meaningfully measured in the long-term. Tracking results in a multi-year timespan, as prescribed in UNHCR's Multi-Year Multi-Partners approach, would enable UNHCR to make a better-informed decision on the risks, feasibility, and likelihood of success of its capacity-building interventions.

The success of UNHCR advocacy and capacity-building efforts is heavily dependent on the external environment, including the geopolitical situation and the host government's political objectives and positioning regarding PoCs. Findings emerging from the four evaluations indicate that national policy directions, attitudes and stances towards the displaced have a strong bearing on the degree to which government actors are receptive to advocacy and capacity-building initiatives and, in turn, on the ability of UNHCR to influence government policy and practice. In this regard, Schenkenberg van Mierop and Collinson (2020: 25) argue that "in the protection sphere more than any other, both the imperatives and the ability of UNHCR to exercise its distinct legal and political authority over the protection response is heavily contingent upon the host government's stance". In Angola, notwithstanding room for bolder advocacy engagement, as discussed above, the evaluation findings indicate that the actual ability of UNHCR to meaningfully influence the shrinking protection space was very limited. This was linked to external factors such as a weak Refugee Law, pervasive negative sentiments, xenophobic attitudes, and outright discrimination of refugees within government and broader society. Similarly, in Federal Iraq, the official pro-IDP narrative and related policies are at odds with the acute vulnerabilities that IDPs continue to endure, largely as a result of their sectarian or tribal affiliations. In such adverse environments, a sharp disparity is likely between the level of effort and resources invested in advocacy and capacity-building and results obtained.

By contrast, in Morocco and KRI, where government attitudes and policy stances are relatively favourable, UNHCR has been better able to leverage its leadership in protection and has succeeded in asserting a protection space through targeted advocacy and capacity building activities. In Morocco, favourable political orientations concerning mixed migration, and the government's interest in positioning itself as a key player for Africa, have opened the political and social debate on asylum and have facilitated UNHCR actions. In these conditions, UNHCR has been able to meaningfully contribute to the decision by the government to draft a specific GCR national action plan, positioning Morocco as one of the leading countries in translating international guidelines into measures adapted to the national context.

Findings in Afghanistan and Iraq indicate that UNHCR could achieve better advocacy and capacity-building outcomes by being more attentive to the local political context. In Afghanistan, the evaluation found limitations

in the way UNHCR approached the capacity building of relevant government entities, taking a supply-led, rather than a problem-driven approach. This led to interventions that did not fully reflect the political dynamics at play among its government counterparts. In Iraq, the evaluation found that in order to obtain good results in advocacy, the CO needed to dedicate significantly more time and resources to understanding its target audiences and tailoring complex messages to key stakeholders. Some donors, in particular, were unclear about UNHCR's responsibilities vis-a-vis IDPs, and the principles that underpin the formulation of HCT-wide advocacy messages relating to this vulnerable group. Similarly, the more technical aspects of UNHCR's legal opinions were not always well understood by target audiences. This may have constrained UNHCR's efforts to gain support for its positions.

2.2. Responding in emergencies and beyond

Main points

- Sudden waves of displacement in protracted crises contexts point to the importance of preparedness and ongoing risk analysis, also in less fragile environments.
- A tension between status- and needs-based approaches to targeting is one reason why in complex emergency contexts UNHCR resources might be spread thin.

Preparedness for emergency response

Sudden waves of displacement in protracted crises point to the importance of preparedness and ongoing risk analysis, also in less fragile environments, to maintain and build capacity to mobilize rapidly and effectively in response to emergencies. In general, the findings indicate that UNHCR emergency responses¹⁶ were timely and effective. In Angola, however, preparedness was found to be inadequate and linked to UNHCR's decision to phase out the CO in 2013-14, just a few months before the start of the Kasai refugee influx. This decision was not based on a thorough risk analysis of the regional context, or of the government's continued need for support, and UNHCR's limited capacity for rapid deployment.

Targeting and prioritization

In contexts such as Iraq and Afghanistan, an unresolved tension between status- and needs-based¹⁷ approaches to targeting may be causing UNHCR to spread itself thin. In line with its mandate, in Afghanistan UNHCR focuses on returned refugees. As the protection cluster lead, it is also responsible for coordinating the protection response for IDPs, and for acting as the provider of last resort for protection interventions aimed at this group. In this context, the CO was found to be stretching its resources thin by trying to assist two large caseloads side-by-side. This was compounded by the scarcity of viable partners to which UNHCR's might hand over programmes aimed at returnees. Ultimately, the CO was unable to formulate a clear rationale to guide its support of the most vulnerable and to prioritise related needs. The situation is broadly similar in Iraq, where Syrian refugees in KRI make up a

¹⁶ UNHCR has mounted emergency responses in Angola to respond to the influx of Kasai refugees from the Democratic Republic of the Congo in 2017, in KRI to the influx of Syrian refugees from North-Eastern Syria in 2019, and in Afghanistan to the influx of Waziristan refugees from Pakistan in 2014.

¹⁷ A status-based approach in targeting entails a focus on assisted populations because of who they are (i.e. refugees, women, children) whereas a needs-based approach focuses on the delivery of protection and assistance on the basis of actual vulnerabilities and humanitarian needs.

relatively small proportion of UNHCR's total caseload, and the needs of the millions of IDPs scattered across the country are considerable (see section 1.2). The tension between status and needs-based targeting is an often unresolved dilemma that UNHCR COs must grapple with in mixed situations, notably those of a protracted nature such as in Iraq and Afghanistan. Under the impulsion of the GCR, this dilemma may be compounded by the fact that the thematic boundaries of UNHCR interventions are increasingly being extended beyond emergencies, to cover comprehensive solutions set in the long term (see below). This may have the effect of stretching UNHCR's resources even further, while also straining the strategic coherence of its operations on the ground.

Main points

- The evaluations found signs of positive livelihood outcomes linked to UNHCR support of livelihood activities for PoCs.
- Progress towards more ambitious goals of employability and self-reliance however has been very modest, also in favourable contexts such as KRI and Morocco.
- Challenges posed by the socio-economic context in countries of exile, including limited private sector development, depressed job markets, cultural and social barriers, continue to hamper UNHCR self-reliance efforts, also in relation to the establishment of partnerships with private sector actors.

Opening paths to self-reliance

The evaluations have seen some signs of positive livelihood outcomes linked to the promotion of livelihood activities. In Morocco, UNHCR has promoted Income Generating Activities (IGA) and vocational trainings (apprenticeships) as key mechanisms for supporting the economic integration of refugees, the main durable solution that is being pursued in the country. In Afghanistan, there was evidence that livelihood activities and vocational skill training supported by UNHCR were yielding positive results. In federal Iraq, on the other hand, prospects are generally less favourable given an adverse security environment, and the fact that many IDPs and some returnees remain vulnerable to secondary or even tertiary displacements. UNHCR has reflected this reality in its livelihoods programmes there, which are mainly confined to emergency interventions.

Promoting inclusion and self-reliance, also through development actors

Progress towards the ambitious goals of improving employability and opening paths to self-reliance, including through the establishment of partnerships with the private sector, has been very modest, including in generally favourable contexts such as KRI and Morocco. The GCR highlights the importance of broadening partnerships with different actors and of leveraging the private sector to support refugees' integration, job creation and self-reliance. In Morocco, UNHCR has started to involve private sector actors in different livelihoods support initiatives (e.g. vocational training, microfinance for IGAs). However, these efforts were quite recent, and the evaluation was not able to observe any concrete results in terms of employment. In Afghanistan, the CO was implementing similar initiatives, focusing on job creation and placements with tailoring companies and the chamber of commerce, but the evaluation found no substantive progress towards employment.

Constrained private sector development, depressed job markets, cultural and social barriers, and legal obstacles to employment are among the main external factors that continue to hamper progress towards self-reliance, ultimately limiting the actual economic integration of IDPs, returnees and refugees, particularly

in the formal economy. In the poor urban and rural areas of Iraq, Afghanistan, Morocco, and Angola, the ability of the displaced to engage in economic ventures, even with UNHCR support, is severely constrained and the displaced, like the host population, are in most cases confined to marginal, casual, poorly paid jobs in the informal economy. Confirming this, a recent study noted that in many contexts, the path to self-reliance, as envisaged under the GCR, may be unrealistic “for large numbers of people in the remote, often under-developed border areas where refugees are usually hosted and where local residents are already struggling to build sustainable livelihoods” (Crawford and O’Callaghan, 2019: 3).

Discrimination and pervasive negative sentiments by authorities and host communities towards the displaced are key constraints to economic integration and self-reliance. In Angola, Morocco, and Iraq, the detrimental effects that widespread negative attitudes towards the displaced have on their psychosocial well-being, for example on their self-esteem, have received little consideration in planning and when assessing what can realistically be achieved in terms of self-reliance in the countries of exile (see also Crawford and O’Callaghan, 2019). The evaluation in Morocco, for example, highlighted that a daily combination of extremely precarious living conditions, feelings of inferiority, and low prospects of better living standards, is a major cognitive obstacle to refugee integration and a key cause of frustration, demotivation and despair. This is especially the case in a context that requires personal abilities and conviction if an individual is to engage in a proactive approach - such as engagement in UNHCR-supported IGA - to overcoming the inherent difficulties of integration.

In addition to the challenges posed by the socio-economic context in countries of exile, programmatic weaknesses in livelihoods support activities have a bearing on livelihoods and self-reliance outcomes. In Angola, despite apparent opportunities for support of livelihoods diversification for Kasai refugees in camps in the Lunda Norte province (e.g. bee-keeping, small shops establishment), UNHCR focused on the promotion of farming activities only, thus constraining access to these opportunities for those refugees who could not engage in farming¹⁸. Limited capacity among partners and UNHCR staff in livelihoods programming played a role in this decision. The 2018 evaluation of UNHCR’s Livelihoods Strategies and Approaches reached a similar conclusion where poor UNHCR implementing partners’ capacity was identified as the most reported challenge of applying UNHCR’s Minimum Criteria for Livelihoods Programming (Frankenberger and Vallet, 2018). Despite some success stories linked to livelihoods support in Morocco, the low amount of initial capital provided for setting up the IGAs hampered beneficiaries’ efforts to obtain a level of income sufficient to reinvest in their business and improve profit margins, ultimately confining them to a subsistence economy.

¹⁸ Notwithstanding this weakness in the design of livelihoods activities, the findings of the evaluation in Angola also point to a number of important initiatives that UNHCR has undertaken to support livelihoods and self-reliance of refugees in Angola. These include: the establishment of a partnership between UNDP and UNHCR in 2018 which includes a component focused on entrepreneurship training for Kasai refugees; the development of a 5-year livelihoods strategy in partnership with WFP to improve livelihoods, promote financial inclusion, and reduce dependency on food assistance; active engagement with a World Bank initiative on social protection to ensure the needs of poor and vulnerable refugees are included in World Bank programmes.

2.3. The empowerment of the people UNHCR serves

Main points

- The ability of UNHCR to identify and reach the most vulnerable is often hampered by contextual factors such as insecurity and lack of humanitarian access in vulnerable areas of the country, or the lack of regularization by government of vulnerable PoC groups.
- UNHCR targeting approaches and limited staff capacity are, in some instances, impairing the identification and reach of the most vulnerable.

Reaching highly vulnerable groups

Contextual factors have made the prioritization of the most vulnerable difficult to realise in some cases. In Morocco, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transsexual and Intersex people are not regularized as refugees by the government and this represents a key barrier to their identification for UNHCR. Lack of sufficient specialized state social care services was also challenging appropriate and comprehensive case management of vulnerable cases in the country, particularly of victims of sexual and gender-based violence, unaccompanied and separated children, and people with serious illnesses or disabilities. In Afghanistan, deeply ingrained gender and patriarchal norms were constraining the ability of UNHCR to reach out to women. In this context female beneficiaries can only be assessed by female staff, but also the recruitment of female staff is challenged by these norms. In Afghanistan and Iraq, high levels of insecurity and lack of humanitarian access are also hampering relief and protection efforts in areas of the country where highly vulnerable populations are found.

UNHCR targeting approaches and limited staff capacity are, in some instances, impairing the identification of the most vulnerable groups, and their selection for inclusion in UNHCR caseloads. In Angola, the selection of Kasai refugees as target beneficiaries of UNHCR farming programmes in 2017 was not based on vulnerability as the main criterion. In Afghanistan, the evaluation found it difficult to establish whether PoCs targeted by UNHCR for protection and assistance were indeed the most vulnerable, as the approach to targeting was not systematic and the rationale for beneficiary selection was unclear. In both Afghanistan and Angola, work to address gender inequality and disability issues was also partly hampered by limited staff resources, as well as by a poor understanding of the UNHCR's Age, Gender, and Diversity Mainstreaming Framework among staff and implementing partners, and by limited gender analysis in Afghanistan in particular. Contrasting with these mixed results is Iraq, where UNHCR spear-headed the design of a needs-based targeting tool for use in both humanitarian and development programmes. However, while this tool shows considerable promise, it is yet to be widely tested and adopted by UNHCR partners.

2.4. The pursuit of solutions

Main points

- In complex emergencies, building effective approaches to local integration and self-reliance and realising UNHCR's catalyst role is hampered by the limited operational presence of development actors.
- UNHCR's ability to realize its catalytic role in these contexts is also challenged by its overstretched capacity in trying to respond to immense needs, act as a provider of last resort, and firefight to fill urgent provision gaps, all of which constrain room for reflection and strategic planning.

UNHCR catalyst role in the search for solutions

The level of importance given by COs to the search for durable solutions is tied to the broader geopolitical context. The search for durable solutions for the millions of returnees and IDPs in Afghanistan and Iraq, and for the thousands of Syrian refugees in KRI, is high on the agenda of UNHCR and the broader aid community in these countries. Indicative of the importance that the Iraq CO places on the search for solutions is the fact that it has hired two dedicated staff¹⁹ since 2017 to focus exclusively on this priority. This commitment owes in large part to the specific political economy of aid in Iraq, which is defined by a shared recognition among aid actors that IDP returns are an integral part of political normalisation, and a core requisite for lasting peace and stability in the country. By contrast, the relatively smaller operations in the developing countries of Morocco and Angola, where the displaced caseload is contained, and the context more stable and less geopolitically charged, the proactive pursuit of protection and solutions appears to be less high on UNHCR's agenda. Despite being a relatively lower priority in Morocco and Angola, prospects for local integration appear more promising in these contexts, in part thanks to the much greater operational presence of development actors on the ground (see below).

In challenging country contexts especially, building effective approaches to local integration and self-reliance and realising UNHCR's catalyst role, as envisaged in the GCR, is hampered by the limited operational presence of development actors. A key element in the realisation of GCR objectives is linked to UNHCR's greater involvement in development processes and frameworks (e.g. the UNSDCF), and in establishing partnerships with development actors such as the World Bank, as well as host governments, in the collective search for durable solutions. In Angola and Morocco, the contribution of development actors to durable solutions is largely in line with the mainly development-oriented agendas of agencies working in these contexts. In fragile and conflict-affected states such as Afghanistan and Iraq, however, convergence and synergies between UNHCR and its development counterparts have been much harder to achieve. A key finding of evaluations in these two countries is that development actors with whom UNHCR should forge strategic alliances have a very limited presence on the ground. At least in part, their scarce operational footprint owes to the fact that their programmes are primarily planned with and delivered through host governments. Where governments' capacity and performance are severely limited, as is typically the case in complex emergencies, development programmes are considerably more difficult to deliver on the ground. In Iraq, the Federal government's lack of active engagement in recovery planning, as well as significant capacity and commitment gaps, represent substantial obstacles to the realisation of UNHCR's catalyst role and the implementation of a realistic hand-over and exit strategies. These findings echo Collinson and Sheckenberg (2019: 32) conclusion that “[w]hile the humanitarian-development nexus has been adopted as the way forward for the humanitarian community at large and as part of the new way of working for the United Nations, it remains to be seen whether these processes will deliver on their promises”.

UNHCR's ability to realize its catalytic role is also challenged by its overstretched capacity in fragile, conflict-affected states which constrains room for reflection and strategic planning. The application of GCR principles has prompted UNHCR to enter potentially vast new areas of intervention. This presents a challenge both to its

¹⁹ A Solutions Officer for the Syrian refugee caseload based in Erbil, KRI and a Senior Transition Officer for the IDP caseload based in Baghdad, Iraq.

capacity and resources, and to the strategic coherence of its country operations. This is especially true in complex environments, such as Afghanistan and Iraq, where UNHCR caseloads span multiple PoCs including not only refugees but also IDPs, returnees and host communities. In Afghanistan, UNHCR is responding to immense needs and, as a provider of last resort, is constantly firefighting to fill urgent provision gaps. This was found by the evaluation to leave the CO with limited time and resources to fulfil its role as facilitator or to lay the strategic grounds for partnerships with development and other actors towards longer-term objectives. Similarly, in Iraq UNHCR must concentrate its resources on addressing acute and protracted humanitarian needs, rather than taking on a lead role in supporting the transition from emergency to solutions-oriented programmes. Although UNHCR consults regularly with development actors in Iraq, it has only developed substantive bilateral relations in this country with the World Bank and UNDP. Joint programming with these two agencies remains, so far, limited.

3. Core concluding messages

A need to firm up the thematic boundaries of UNHCR operations. The application of GCR principles has caused UNHCR to enter potentially vast new areas of intervention. This is especially true in complex environments, such as Afghanistan and Iraq, where UNHCR caseloads span multiple populations of concern including not only refugees but also IDPs, returnees and host communities. To ensure the continued strategic coherence of UNHCR operations, and to minimize the risk of new programme strands stretching beyond available capacities, a degree of consolidation may now be necessary.

The goal of consolidating operations or maintaining them at current levels is made more challenging by the fact that the GCR approach is by nature broad-based and comprehensive, and generally entails more rather than less programming.

In complex environments, consolidation must be informed by a clear rationale for prioritization and for firming up the thematic boundaries of UNHCR operations.

To stretch or to link up? The countries covered by the four UNHCR-commissioned evaluations (Afghanistan, Angola, Iraq, Morocco) have shown clearly that progress towards GCR goals requires programme inputs that are, in both scale and nature, outside the scope of UNHCR's mandate or area of competence.

In seeking to address this, UNHCR Country Offices have pragmatically explored two distinct avenues. The first has been to stretch UNHCR's core area of competence and to acquire new capabilities in sectors such as job creation and access to public services. The second has been to build linkages between UNHCR's own area of competence and capabilities held outside of it by development actors.

Each of these approaches come with benefits and shortcomings. In the final analysis, however, linking up is the preferable option. This core assumption should inform a drive to develop better modalities for UNHCR partnerships with development actors.

A need to support a shift in the paradigm for development programming in fragile and conflict-affected states. In pursuing GCR goals through linkages with development actors, the readiness of prospective partners to engage with UNHCR is critical.

In Afghanistan and Iraq, convergence and synergies between UNHCR and development actors have been much harder to achieve than in Angola and Morocco. This mainly owes to the limited operational footprint of development agencies in complex emergencies.

In these contexts, improved prospects for partnerships call for a new paradigm in which development actors can engage more directly with UNHCR in joint programme delivery at the field level.

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