

Executive Summary

Purpose of the evaluation and intended audience

The purpose of the Afghanistan Country Operation Evaluation (COE) is to generate practical recommendations to inform UNHCR operations in the future, informed by robust and systematic analysis. The evaluation aimed to:

- a) Support UNHCR to make evidence-based decisions for future operational planning and strategy;
- b) Inform decisions to strengthen partnership and programme design thereby improving assistance to IDP's, returnees, refugees and host populations, including Persons with Specific Needs (PSNs);
- c) Assess the effectiveness of UNHCR's plans and activities within the specific country context.¹

This evaluation is part of a series of evaluations of a similar nature also being undertaken in three other countries (Angola, Iraq and Egypt). While the different country evaluations should be seen as individual exercises, they have taken a consistent approach in terms of design, execution and presentation.

The evaluation covers the timeframe 2012 to 2019, with a focus on 2016 to mid-2019, and examines results achieved in the areas of protection, inclusion and durable solutions, as well as looking at UNHCR Afghanistan's strategic positioning. Where relevant, the evaluation seeks to highlight the main features in the operational environment that either constrain or enable efforts in the transitional period.

This report is prepared primarily for the UNHCR Afghanistan Country Office, and the UNHCR Regional Bureau Bangkok. A secondary audience of the evaluation includes other UNHCR Bureaux and Divisions, the Senior Executive Team, as well as UNHCR partners – including government and humanitarian and development actors. This includes; The Ministry of Refugees and Repatriation (MORR); The Provincial Directorates of Refugees and Repatriation (DORRs)²; the Humanitarian Country Team (HCT) and the One UN team; other United Nations and multilateral agencies³; cooperating partners and other NGOs; and donors. It is expected that these stakeholder groups will use the evaluation for future strategic decisions. While not a primary intended user, the direct beneficiaries of UNHCR's operations in Afghanistan are a key stakeholder group for the evaluation: communities, refugees, returnees, Internally Displaced Persons (IDP), and (Persons with Specific Needs) PSNs; men and women, and boys and girls.

Methodology

The evaluation used a mixed-methods approach combining a desk study, interviews with key internal and external stakeholders and two field visits. A total of 222 stakeholders were interviewed or participated in Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), including UNHCR staff, NGO partners, actors within the Government of Afghanistan, donors, Persons of Concern (PoCs) and other multilateral agencies. Field visits were conducted in Kabul and three sub- and field offices of Mazar-i-Sharif, Jalalabad and Kandahar.

Three areas of inquiry provide an overall framework for the evaluation:

- **Results and Performance:** What have been the results in the areas of assistance, protection, and solutions as achieved by the UNHCR Country Operation? Under which conditions has UNHCR achieved these results, and what were the most important contextual and operational factors/decisions contributing to or impeding achievement of these results?
- **Contributing and constraining factors:** How strategically has UNHCR been positioned within the country context, and what are the key factors driving strategic decision-making? To what

¹ This is in line with the Terms of Reference (ToR) for the Afghanistan COE in Annex 1).

² MORR and DORR are UNHCR's DiREC counterpart at the level of the Government of Afghanistan.

³ Key Interagency partners that the COE consider as intended audiences are development-oriented agencies: United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), UN International Organization on Migration (IOM), International Labour Organization (ILO), and World Bank.

extent do the strategy and Country Operation Plan have coherence and/or alignment with the work of other humanitarian/development actors, private sector, and civil society actors within the country? How well aligned is the existing UNHCR strategy and Country Operation Plan to the current and/or evolving needs of the population and wider country context?

- **Future strategic directions:** How can UNHCR build on results achieved to date, and further leverage UNHCR's strategic position and influence within the country, to optimize the potential impact of collective efforts towards protection and solutions for UNHCR Persons of Concern, and the communities that host them?

Following the development of key findings, a co-creation workshop was held with members of UNHCR staff to generate appropriate and realistic recommendations. The workshop was attended by UNHCR staff from both UNHCR's evaluation service, regional bureau and country operation in Afghanistan.

An adverse context

The UNHCR Operation in Afghanistan is working within an extremely complex and challenging context. Afghanistan is now entering the 40th year of conflict which has resulted in a complex humanitarian situation and protracted displacement of its population. As of the end of 2018, there were 2,759,010 PoCs living in Afghanistan and the number is increasing. Attempts to reduce conflict over the last decade have consistently failed. The latest peace talks in 2019 between the US government and the Taliban – which notably excluded the GoA – have not led to any reduction in violence thus far, and political instability and armed violence remains widespread.

The on-going insecurity is exacerbated by multiple and recurrent natural hazards that are intensified by ongoing climate change. Within this context, there is no linear progression from humanitarian to developmental support for those displaced, as repeated shocks and crises reconfirm the need for humanitarian assistance. This adds resource pressure on agencies like UNHCR, and creates further complexity as PoCs can suffer multiple displacements and hence not easily conform to status-based criteria.

Furthermore, there are significant regional dynamics that affect PoCs in Afghanistan, politicizing the asylum space, requiring UNHCR to carefully co-ordinate its policy positions and operations across Iran, Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Summary of Findings

UNHCR has delivered a wide range of results supporting significant numbers of PoCs, demonstrating an ability to provide short-term protection and showing leadership where others have been absent. This has involved playing an important role in piloting and mainstreaming cash-based interventions and finding ways to overcome cash-based challenges that currently limit its potential use. In addition, UNHCR has provided long-term livelihood support to PoCs with some success.

However, UNHCR has struggled to mobilise longer-term support from other stakeholders which is not helped by **structural challenges within the UN system which constrains a One UN approach**, such as incompatible budgetary systems. This has led to a critical absence of development partners within UNHCR's areas of operation, leaving a gap between humanitarian and development support. UNHCR has stepped into this gap, stretching its resources, but at the same time struggled to cultivate an enabling environment which would help PoCs transition into sustainable situations.

This is compounded by the fact that **UNHCR's government partners are not yet capable of taking full responsibility of PoCs, despite some UNHCR successes to mobilise government support**. Combined with an absence of development actors, **UNHCR is left with no real strategies to transition responsibility for PoCs to others**.

This is not helped by **a lack of clarity of UNHCR's roles and responsibilities**, both thematically and temporally, and an unclear understanding of what success looks like and how to measure it. This lack of clarity on the boundaries of where UNHCR's roles and responsibilities end has contributed **to a lack of strategic focus where needs-based and status-based responses can be in tension with each other, blurring UNHCR's boundaries with other stakeholders**.

UNHCR's coordination and leadership within the cluster system are appreciated by the sector, although more can be done to complement data produced by other actors. Outside of the cluster system UNHCR is lauded as working well with government departments, with a willingness to provide support and information to other UN-projects. This strong relationship with the government has led to **the adoption of important policies at the national level**, with the recent *Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees* (SSAR) well aligned with the global Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF) and Global Compact for Refugees (GCR).

Finally, UNHCR has made progress to increase its support to women and girls in the face of challenging social norms, **but there are design and capacity issues which limit the scope and reach of its gender-based programming.**

Conclusions

UNHCR has, commendably, tried to respond to the immense needs in Afghanistan, but that has resulted in over-stretch and a certain lack of strategic coherence. This is complicated by the difficulty in defining – conceptually and contextually – where UNHCR responsibility for PoCs ends.

While UNHCR has provided valuable support to PoCs, there are tensions between UNHCR's status-based approach which predominantly focuses on returnees and refugees, and a needs-based approach which often identifies IDPs as the priority. As such, UNHCR is not always reaching the most vulnerable PoCs.

The transformational change in the Ministry of Refugees and Repatriation needed for UNHCR to be able to transition responsibility to the government is unlikely in the near-term, and the continuing struggle to mobilise sufficient support for UNHCR PoCs from other actors has resulted in UNHCR finding it difficult to develop and implement any effective transition strategies.

The SSAR planning and policy-making process currently does not sufficiently engage other key actors which has compromised UNHCR's ability to mobilise those actors to provide support to returnees in (Priority Areas of Return and Reintegration (PARR) areas and has failed to harness the collective wisdom of the humanitarian sector.

The One UN approach is encouraging greater alignment and collaboration between UN agencies and UNHCR is valued for its leadership role within the protection cluster. However, structural challenges within the UN system remain, inhibiting the full scale of collaboration that is rightly expected by the government of Afghanistan.

There has been progress in addressing age and gender through the lens of the global AGD, particularly within the PSN programme in Afghanistan. However, not all of the mechanisms used work as effectively as they could to ensure AGD is fully embedded within operations, and continued work in this area will be important to fully harness the AGD potential of UNHCR.

Recommendations

Recommendations were co-created with UNHCR staff during a co-creation workshop. The workshop was framed around four key questions:

- How can UNHCR (including regional and global levels) work effectively through national government (a la CRRF/GCR) when faced with uneven government capacity, particularly with the principal national government counterpart agency in Afghanistan?
- How can UNHCR (including regional and global levels) more effectively respond to community-based development needs in Afghanistan, including through partnerships?
- How can UNHCR Afghanistan move beyond meeting basic needs in chronic and protracted emergency situations (e.g. winterization) and effectively influence other actors who need to do more?
- How can UNHCR (including regional and global levels) better support and inform decision-making and prioritization when managing limited resources to meet acute needs across multiple pillars in Afghanistan?

Discussions from these questions informed the following five recommendations.

1. Clarify the boundaries of UNHCR's roles and responsibilities in Afghanistan, defining the parameters of UNHCR involvement with different populations of concern.

UNHCR's roles and responsibilities in Afghanistan can be better defined. Improving the clarity of roles and responsibilities is key and this should be accompanied by improved prioritisation processes that identify status based PoCs that are within UNHCR's mandate. In parallel, UNHCR should use the information it collects through its needs-assessments to inform advocacy campaigns for all PoCs, whether they are prioritised for direct support or not. This will allow UNHCR to be more focused whilst recognising that it has a duty to all PoCs as rights holders. In advance of the next planning cycle, UNHCR Headquarters, the Country Operation and the Field Offices should:

- i. Conduct internal and external stakeholder consultations to identify where UNHCR can best add value and what 'success' for reintegration in Afghanistan looks like.
- ii. Articulate clearly where UNHCR's responsibility for PoCs ends and accompany this with metrics or criteria to measure whether the boundaries of UNHCR responsibility have been reached.
- iii. Continue to develop the vulnerability index to improve the identification of status-based PoCs, rolling this out for UNHCR programming and with other actors where funding allows.
- iv. Leverage UNHCR data – particularly individual level data that other agencies do not typically collect - to inform advocacy campaigns to mobilise resources and galvanize support for all PoCs.
- v. Refine UNHCR planning frameworks to explicitly plan and budget for advocacy campaigns.

2. Update the country level partnership strategy to complement the SSAR support platform which includes direct and indirect influencing opportunities for UNHCR, capitalising where possible on well-established relationships of other actors working towards the GCR.

Many of UNHCR's operational and conceptual challenges are linked to the support provided (or not) by other stakeholders and UNHCR needs to develop a strategy at the country level that seeks to mobilise and engage these stakeholders. This strategy should immediately be developed by the Country Operation with support from their Field Offices. The strategy should consider:

- i. Diversifying UNHCR's capacity development engagement with additional government ministries to strengthen the ability of the government to respond to UNHCR's priorities in the short and long term.
- ii. Mobilising key development actors and others within the humanitarian sector to support UNHCR's priorities.
- iii. Identifying how these partnerships can be deepened at the field as well as policy level.
- iv. Using the SARR to increase the opportunities throughout the year to engage with the humanitarian and development sector – such as civil society and academia – to improve buy-in and assist mobilisation.
- v. Developing a results framework and indicators for tracking success and achievements of the partnership plan.
- vi. Identifying current activities that sit outside UNHCR's mandate and identify the most responsible ways for UNHCR to transition out, developing 2-3 year responsible disengagement strategies.

3. Work with government and UNHCR partners to analyse government action on PoCs through a political-economy lens to understand the range of factors that inhibit or enable greater support to PoCs and use this to inform a more rounded approach to capacity building by UNHCR.

A thorough analysis of the enablers and disablers of government support to UNHCR priority PoCs is needed and a political-economy analysis lens applied to fully understand the dynamics of capability, commitment, corruption and co-ordination. This then needs to inform what 'capacity' means for UNHCR within the context of capacity development in Afghanistan. In advance of the next planning cycle, the Country Operation should:

- i. Conduct a joint analysis with government actors to analyse government capacity through a political-economy lens and consider commitment and corruption, as well as capacity.
- ii. Develop specific approaches to address the range of issues arising from the political-economy analysis and work collaboratively with other stakeholders working on similar issues.
- iii. Develop metrics to measure progress of capacity building and use those to inform adaptation of approaches as needed.

4. Develop a comprehensive communications campaign to improve the humanitarian and development communities' understanding of the rationale of UNHCR's mandate and why others need to support UNHCR priority PoCs, as well as UNHCR's contributions to vulnerable groups outside its mandate.

As per UNHCR's communications strategy, a key communications objective is to build support for protection and solutions for refugees and other PoCs. In order to strengthen UNHCR Afghanistan's approach to this objective, the Country Operation, with help from the Regional Bureau, should:

- i. Identify key opportunities to strengthen the understanding of other stakeholders as to why support to UNHCR priority PoCs is important and highlight the recognition that there is a substantial gap in support between humanitarian and development assistance. These opportunities may include:
 - Highlight the link between PARRs and peace processes and value to wider One UN objectives
 - Highlight challenges faced on the ground at the Afghanistan international pledging conference in November 2020 (TBC), encouraging donors to close the humanitarian-development gap
 - Use UN Common Country Analyses linked to the sustainable development framework (UNSDCF) to further emphasise the humanitarian-development link.
- ii. Articulate clearly the unique vulnerabilities and needs of UNHCR's priority PoCs and why they need to be prioritised; communicate this systematically across the humanitarian and development sectors linking to the partnership strategy (recommendation 2).
- iii. Highlight the benefits that the information collected by UNHCR's needs assessments make to needs-based PoCs as well as status-based PoCs.
- iv. Develop a quarterly 2-page brief to show the impact of UNHCR's vulnerability index on programming choices.

5. Strengthen the implementation of the age, gender and diversity policy (AGD) to better monitor and adapt to complex and changing AGD needs

UNHCR's approach to inclusion follows core actions from six areas of engagement in the AGD policy. The current approach to inclusion is focused on reach and output targets and less on the actual change that those targets are leading to for individuals and communities. The Country Operation should therefore work with the Field Offices to:

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- i. Embed gender context analysis within the programme cycle and conduct these analyses across different contexts within Afghanistan to inform operation plans and ensure AGD-inclusive programming (policy area 1). Key findings should be clearly documented and developed into appropriate monitoring indicators.
 - ii. Further develop AGD monitoring mechanisms to ensure outcome level change data is captured. Outcome-level evidence will strengthen organisational learning and allow for adaptation (policy area 5) in relation to shifting gender and social norms.
 - iii. Strengthen systems for monitoring cases of SGBV to inform prevention and referral mechanisms (policy area 6e)