

UNHCR Sudan Country Strategy Evaluation Executive Summary

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Evaluation information at a glance	
Title of the evaluation:	Country Strategy Evaluation Sudan
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Executive summary

Introduction, scope, and methods

Purpose and scope of the study: The purpose of this strategic, learning-oriented Country Strategy Evaluation (CSE) is to inform UNHCR's multi-year strategic plan (MYSP) for Sudan from 2023, support programming during 2022, and strengthen UNHCR's adaptability to the dynamic political context in Sudan and the wider region. The objectives of the evaluation are to (i) evaluate the relevance of UNHCR's strategies and operation in Sudan (Section 4); (ii) assess the effectiveness of its performance (Section 5); and (iii) evaluate the coherence of its strategic engagement with partners to deliver its vision (Section 6).

The evaluation covers the entirety of UNHCR's portfolio from 2018 to 2021, focusing on the post-revolution period from 2019 to the end of December 2021. During this period there were a number of strategic reorientations in UNHCR's work in Sudan, including a greater focus on IDPs and host communities, and the pursuit of a longer-term more solution-oriented approach for refugees and IDPs alongside UNHCR's core business of emergency refugee response and protection.

Methods: The evaluation adopted a utilization-oriented and mixed methods approach. This involved review and analysis of secondary documentation, interviews with over 240 Key Informants, Focus Group Discussions with Persons of Concern (POCs) and host communities, mini-workshops with UNHCR staff at Sub-Office and Field Office levels, online surveys of UNHCR staff and UNHCR partners respectively, and observation. Findings were triangulated on an ongoing basis. The team carried out field missions in five states and covered two more remotely. Following the military coup on October 25th 2021 and change in political context, the evaluation approach was adapted to support UNHCR staff to reflect upon and adjust to the highly unstable and dynamic context, in the spirit of real-time learning, collectively developing three possible scenarios for the future trajectory of Sudan, exploring the implications of each for UNHCR's focus. A Theory of Change to guide the CSE was also constructed retrospectively (through a participatory process with the country office), and adapted during the main phase of the evaluation, including suggestions to feed into the MYSP for 2023 (see Annex 4). The main constraints the evaluation team faced were due to political instability and the military coup, which cut short data collection and key informant interviews in Khartoum and Khartoum state and hampered collective team analysis.

Sudan context and UNHCR's operation

Sudan context: The period covered by the evaluation includes the end of the three-decade rule of President Bashir's totalitarian regime when a popular revolution overthrew the government in April 2019, following severe economic crisis in 2018-19. A new Transitional Government of Sudan (GoS), established in August 2019, inherited a legacy of decades of poor governance and economic mismanagement, and launched a political and economic reform process. Sudan was readmitted into the international financial system, and the Juba Peace Agreement (JPA) was signed in October 2020. However, the economic crisis deepened: hyper-inflation took hold, poverty levels rose, and political volatility intensified. In the two years following the revolution violent conflict increased in parts of the country, including Darfur. UNAMID's withdrawal left a protection vacuum that UNITAMS cannot fill. Insecurity continued in the politically contested Two Areas of South Kordofan and Blue Nile. Lack of humanitarian access has been a major issue. Regionally, conflict and volatility in neighbouring countries has triggered new refugee influxes, particularly from the Tigray region of Ethiopia as well as South Sudan and Central African Republic. The military coup of October 25th 2021 dissolved the transitional government and Sudan's army chief appointed himself the head of a new ruling body, triggering large and recurrent waves of popular protest. International economic and development assistance has been suspended.

UNHCR's operation: UNHCR Sudan is one of the largest and most complex UNHCR operations in the world, with over 5 million IDPs, returnees and refugees spread across a large geographical area. Between 2018 and 2019, UNHCR's expenditure trebled. Following the strategic reset to step-up programming for IDPs, largely focussed on Darfur, the number of IDPs targeted by UNHCR increased by around 37%. However, in 2020 less than 20% of UNHCR's expenditure was spent on IDPs while almost 80% was spent on refugee programming, despite the greater number of the former.

Relevance

Alignment with global frameworks, regional strategies and national policies

Increased alignment globally, regionally and nationally: Since 2018 there has been increasing alignment between the main strategies guiding UNHCR's operations in Sudan, global refugee frameworks, UNHCR's corporate policies and strategies, regional strategies, and the emerging national policy context under the transitional government. This was facilitated by the GoS making nine broad aspirational pledges at the Global Refugee Forum (GRF) at the end of 2019, with the support of UNHCR, in line with global refugee frameworks including the Global Compact for Refugees (GCR). The transitional government's emphasis on developmental interventions similarly enabled UNHCR in Sudan to align to the corporate shift in direction to take a longer-term solutions-oriented approach, working more closely with development actors. This more progressive national policy context was in marked contrast to the previous regime when even the most basic elements of protection were severely constrained, but the gap between progressive policy statements and operationalization of those statements is substantial, particularly in the changing political context.

As well as supporting GoS to implement its aspirational GRF pledges, UNHCR has engaged with the GoS National Plan for Protection of Civilians (NPPOC, which includes a component on addressing IDPs and refugees) and has begun to raise awareness at state level. UNHCR has provided substantial support to GoS at many different levels for the regional IGAD 'Solutions' initiative and has supported GoS in developing a National Vision for Host Communities and Refugees, with reference to the JPA.

Alignment at the subnational level: There is an important role for UNHCR staff at Sub-Office level to play in supporting strategic thinking and the roll-out of national strategies at state level. At the Darfur level UNHCR is credited for its vision and approach in promoting integrated cross-UN ways of working in line with Resolution 2524; in practice, alignment has been constrained by the limited capacity of UNITAMS and slow progress in producing an integrated cross-UN strategy.

Expanded focus (IDPs and solutions): As UNHCR Sudan has aligned more closely with global, regional and national frameworks and policies, its portfolio has expanded considerably: 'stepping-up' its engagement with IDPs (most evident in Darfur) and pursuing longer-term and durable solutions for both refugees and IDPs. This has contributed to a sense of overload and stress for the CO and senior leadership, sometimes lacking prioritisation within the expanded portfolio. Operationalization of UNHCR Sudan's strategic reorientation to a more expansive portfolio is lagging and requires attention to be fully internalized.

Strategic and operational adaptation: UNHCR has demonstrated adaptive agility at the strategic level, appropriately and rapidly changing strategic direction and working more closely with government in the transitional phase, although it does not appear to have planned for different political scenarios if the positive trajectory of the transition did not materialize. Generally, its contextual analysis is weak, especially at sub-national level with a few exceptions, although this is essential to understand local conflict dynamics and the protection implications, and to inform conflict sensitive programming. Constraints include lack of expertise amongst UNHCR staff and limited networking and engagement with local knowledge, although there are recent good practice examples of how strong contextual analysis can

inform adaptive programming in response to instability and conflict: advocacy briefs produced by the protection cluster in Darfur, and the Protection of Civilians Incident Tracking tool (developed collaboratively with UNITAMS).

UNHCR appropriately adapted programming modalities in response to the economic crisis, including prioritizing in-kind distribution of humanitarian assistance over cash transfers, and it adapted plans and budgeting in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. UNHCR staff assess the organization to be 'reasonably adaptive'. However, a weak organizational monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) culture is a constraint to adaptive management.

Tailoring to the diverse needs and priorities of POCs and host communities: UNHCR's needs assessments are generally strong, implying it has good knowledge of the needs and priorities of POCs and host communities. But the record is mixed in terms of programming meeting those needs and priorities in all their diversity. Constraining factors include a) programming being overly driven by donor priorities and requirements; b) the need for stronger ongoing communication with POCs and host communities; and b) lack of access and inadequate financial resources.

Operationalisation of the Humanitarian-Development-Peace (HDP) nexus: The 'HDP nexus' is a new concept for most staff within UNHCR Sudan as it is for the wider aid sector. Nevertheless, UNHCR's strategic reorientation to promote a longer-term perspective in its emergency response, to incorporate durable solutions and to support the peacebuilding priorities of the transitional government indicates close alignment with nexus ways of thinking, whether or not they are labelled as such. UNHCR's performance in adopting nexus ways of working is weaker, for example lack of joint conflict analysis, excepting some good practice in its work on durable solutions.

Effectiveness

UNHCR's reporting on results and outcomes: Data and evidence gathering to assess performance are inadequate. Constraints include lack of investment and very limited human resources dedicated to MEL, and a cumbersome corporate RBM system. Lesson-learning processes appear to be *ad hoc* without documentation or follow-up, implying a weak learning culture that limits UNHCR's ability to take corrective action. The evaluation drew on this limited evidence base, supplementing it with data and evidence gathered during the evaluation process.

Effectiveness against Strategic Objectives at country level

SO1: Protection and essential humanitarian response: UNHCR has worked well to leverage its comparative advantage in strengthening national policy on protection, for example through promotion of the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF). But there are performance weaknesses in core areas of its protection mandate, including delivering on normative functions (setting standards and frameworks, and ensuring they are followed) related to coordination, advocacy and leadership to ensure essential protection systems and mechanisms are in place. Performance is patchy across the operation: for example shortcomings in addressing GBV and community protection in the refugee emergency in the east, and the protection implications of the economic crisis and inadequate basic services for protracted refugee caseloads and the stateless. There are also good practice examples to learn from, for example UNHCR's support to the Network of Women's Protection Committees in Darfur. As mixed migration is likely to increase as national and regional security deteriorates, associated with human smuggling and trafficking, a clear strategy and carefully chosen partnerships will be essential to address current scepticism that the various working groups in which UNHCR is involved, can contribute to transformative change.

SO2: Emergency Response and Preparedness: ¹ Aspects of UNHCR's strategic reorientation are apparent and appreciated in its recent emergency responses, including increased support to host communities and early engagement with government line ministries for service provision. But there have been fundamental shortcomings, including protection, staffing and leadership issues, and poor coordination in its response to the high-profile Ethiopian refugee emergency in the East, despite this being core UNHCR business that has occupied much senior management time. While UNHCR has improved its performance more remains to be done, particularly around protection. Other major emergencies have received less attention, particularly severe flooding that affected the protracted refugee caseload in White Nile State where the response has been underfunded and somewhat neglected, despite its annual occurrence. UNHCR has a mixed record in responding to conflict-related emergencies affecting IDPs where context analysis and conflict sensitive programming have lagged behind events. It has a key role to play in certain sectors (protection and shelter and NFIs), but this has not been given commensurate attention to refugee-related emergencies where UNHCR is held fully to account, despite the scale of some IDP emergencies.

SO3: Durable Solutions: At the policy level there has been progress in leveraging the peace dividends of the political transition, through leadership and collaboration in support of the IGAD Solutions Platform and the draft National Solutions Strategy. UNHCR expanded its focus from refugees to solutions for IDPs and returnees, contributing to an evidence base for solutions in Darfur through the Durable Solutions Working Group (DSWG), a positive example of cross-UN collaboration. Recent research by the DSWG demonstrates the importance of understanding contextual differences, why an area-based approach is entirely appropriate, and how more than one solution is likely to apply to IDPs simultaneously, thus moving beyond conventional approaches to solutions. But UNHCR does not currently have adequate capacity to support its ambition in durable solutions.

SO4: Catalysing development-oriented responses: There has been good initial progress in capacitating national social service systems towards refugee inclusion, particularly in the education sector, and to a lesser degree, health. With the World Bank, UNHCR did valuable groundwork towards GoS eligibility for funding under the IDA-19 Window for Host Communities and Refugees (WHR). There are a number of developmental programmes specifically targeting or inclusive of refugees and other POCs, supported by UNHCR. Until the coup opportunities for development programming and inclusion were opening up. However, factors that emerge as obstacles are both external: GoS and partner capacities and donor willingness to fund; and internal: UNHCR capacity and influence.

Delivery of commitments on UNHCR's Age, Gender, Diversity (AGD) policy: UNHCR staff have a high awareness of this policy, and a good start has been made implementing aspects of it, such as assessments. There is some way to go, however, to realise the spirit of the policy, requiring a considerable culture shift to allow the voices of POCs to drive strategy. The pay-off could be an improvement in donor relations once evidence of robust feedback loops are in place. Data from UNHCR's annual participatory assessments are disaggregated by gender, age and people with specific needs (PSN), but could be strengthened with insights on contextual factors that impact vulnerability, such as ethnicity and livelihood. Disaggregated data on needs does not necessarily translate into the needs of different groups being met, with examples of some groups being overlooked (eg children and youth in the recent refugee emergency in the east). Women are generally well-represented in committee structures but it is not clear that they are meaningfully engaged in decision-making: separate committee structures for men and women may work better.

Enabling and constraining factors for effectiveness: The engagement of UNHCR staff in reflective

¹ See the briefing note prepared by the evaluation team for more detailed analysis and learning from UNHCR's response to three emergency responses in 2020-21, including the refugee response in the east.

exercises during the course of the evaluation is itself an enabling factor. Constraints include low technical capacity; skillsets of staff not suited to changes in strategic direction; aspects of human resource systems regarded as demotivating, especially for national staff; and the slow and cumbersome nature of some UNHCR systems such as procurement and MEL. Barriers external to the organisation can inform theory of change and scenario planning exercises as multi-year strategies are created.

Sustainability: Achieving sustainability is implicit rather than explicit in UNHCR Sudan's approach. Given its importance, UNHCR Sudan would benefit from adopting a robust working definition of, and approach to sustainability, ensuring this is embedded within its overall country strategy.

Coherence – Partnership strategic engagement ²

Strategic approach: The growing importance of partnerships to UNHCR globally, to deliver on its mandate, is evident in Sudan. Efforts have been made to focus on multiple forms of partnership around its strategic objectives. The time-consuming nature of partnership work means further strategic prioritisation is needed.

Partnership with GoS: There has been good progress in high-level policy engagement with GoS, particularly around the Whole-of-Government approach, cross-government policy and steps towards inclusion in government service delivery. The consequences of the military coup may require a recalibration of UNHCR's relations with GoS, adapting to a changed political and policy landscape.

UNHCR's partnership with the Commission of Refugees (COR) requires ongoing effort to move beyond a transactional, funding-focused relationship to a more transformational partnership focused on the wider GoS policy agenda, with UNHCR able to be a critical friend, for example addressing issues raised in internal audit reports. Weak capacity of government ministries delivering social services at local level is a major constraint to their ability to extend services to POCs. UNHCR has provided capacity development at different levels, but in a relatively ad hoc manner, not yet guided by an overarching strategy and approach.

Partnerships and coordination at federal and state level: In the absence of clear government-led national planning processes, UNHCR is utilizing multiple interagency coordination structures related to its mandate and strategic objectives, but without systematic assessment of results. The effectiveness of UNHCR's coordination role on refugees, IDPs and other POCs is mixed: positives include the launch of the first comprehensive Country Refugee Response Plan (CRRP) through the Refugee Consultation Forum (RCF) in 2020, while interagency coordination needs to be stepped up to address duplication of effort.

Policy partnerships: UNHCR is utilising a range of mechanisms to coordinate progress towards its four strategic objectives. Policy-oriented partnerships are in place for protection, emergency response and solutions, but not yet to the same extent for peacebuilding or development. Mechanisms are frequently fragmented, their effectiveness not yet optimal, and lacking systematic assessment of results.

Optimising collaboration with UN partners: Recent changes in UNHCR leadership have strengthened UNHCR's overall relations within the UN in Sudan, bilaterally and jointly, although relationships remain weaker at state level. Building a stronger interface with the UN's sustainable development planning agenda in Sudan is still work-in-progress and needs to be given higher priority going forward, as part of UNHCR's overall approach to build the UN system response, particularly if the context becomes more conducive. Some long-standing bilateral partnerships are robust, for example with UNICEF and WFP, based on good synergy, complementarity and use of comparative advantage. Others need effort to maximize comparative advantage, for example on the protection agenda with IoM and UNFPA, and peacebuilding

² This is a summary of an in-depth partnership assessment conducted as a 'deep dive' within the overall evaluation.

and development with UNDP. Integration and leveraging the efforts of others will reduce stretch and overload for UNHCR and help build sustainability. Joint working with UNITAMS is improving, particularly around the protection agenda in Darfur, but is constrained by UNITAMS capacity and the absence of coordination architecture for the JPA, both in Darfur and the Two Areas.

Partnerships with other national, regional and international actors: There is mixed progress in collaboration with other national, regional, and international players to leverage protection, solutions, and implementation of GCR pledges. The effectiveness of implementing partner relationships could be enhanced if they are more rounded and jointly add value, requiring changes to the Project Partnership Agreement (PPA) system.³ There is good preliminary progress in longer-term development partnerships and private sector engagement. Engagement with donors needs to be stepped up, as strategic partners and not just funders, requiring strengthened UNHCR capacity; also with regional actors as partners for Solutions; and with local and national actors to strengthen local context analysis and context-sensitive approaches.

Key themes and lessons learned on partnerships: Partnership with UNHCR creates added value for partners and overall benefits outweigh the costs. However, almost all partnerships can be developed to become more transformational and less transactional, with better use of comparative advantage. A number of obstacles to partnership working are internal to UNHCR and can be addressed through building internal capacities and systems (including MEL), as well as UNHCR's partnership ethos building on principles of good partnership.

Conclusions and recommendations

UNHCR has become an increasingly high profile and influential actor in Sudan in the last three years as it stepped into the space that opened after the revolution in 2019.

Conclusion 1 – Strategic positioning in the Sudan context: UNHCR appropriately exploited its strategic position in advising and supporting the transitional government to develop progressive policies for refugees and IDPs, and strategic alignment between UNHCR Sudan's strategies, global frameworks and the national policy context in Sudan has strengthened. However, recent political developments underline the fragility of policy gains and underscore the importance of a robust government engagement and capacity development strategy, guided by an in-depth understanding of the political context.

Conclusion 2 – Context and conflict sensitivity: UNHCR successfully adapted to the opportunities in the political context post-revolution, but its record in preparing for more negative changes in the political and security context has been constrained by inadequate context analysis, especially at sub-national level, hampering its strategic resilience. At best this has resulted in an overly optimistic expectation of the political trajectory in Sudan; at worst, this has risked conflict insensitive programming that could fuel tensions.

→ ***Recommendation 1: UNHCR should strengthen its adaptability to Sudan's dynamic political context to remain relevant, and especially its contextual analysis to inform how it should continue to support GoS in developing and rolling out progressive policies for refugees, IDPs and host communities in line with global and regional frameworks, and in close coordination with other UN agencies.***

Conclusion 3 – Strategic prioritisation: UNHCR has substantially expanded its portfolio and POC caseload, making good progress and providing leadership in some newer areas of work, at policy level in search of regional durable solutions and in catalysing development-oriented responses. Insufficient

³ Building on changes to the PPA system, which UNHCR is implementing globally

strategic prioritisation has, however, resulted in overload and stress for staff at all levels, sometimes compromising the quality of programming as there is little space for analysis and reflection. Programming risks being spread too thinly and lacks adequate analysis of the respective comparative advantage of UNHCR vis-a-vis its partners. As the security situation deteriorates UNHCR has to place most emphasis on its first two strategic objectives: protection and humanitarian assistance, and responding to emergencies. It must also give equal attention to IDP emergencies and the sectors where UNHCR is leading, as to refugee emergencies.

→ ***Recommendation 2: UNHCR should prioritise within its expanded portfolio, according to its comparative advantage in playing a critical normative role, (for example, leaving service delivery to others), and prioritising amongst its strategic objectives according to the evolving context in Sudan (see scenario-specific recommendations), to address the current sense of overload and to provide clearer strategic direction to staff, especially at sub-national level.***

Conclusion 4 – Strategic partnerships: Partnership working and leveraging the efforts of other actors is a top priority for UNHCR. Considerable efforts have been made to build strategic partnership and coordination structures, although the effectiveness of these, and GoS participation and leadership in particular, remain patchy, particularly at state level. Duplication and high transaction costs in terms of staff time are a challenge, as are aspects of the internal organisational system and culture. All UNHCR partners would like more open, two-way partnerships, which create shared value and are less transactional.

→ ***Recommendation 3: UNHCR should develop a strategic approach to partnership-working and strengthen its related internal functions, capabilities, incentives, and systems towards this end.***

→ ***Recommendation 4: UNHCR should enhance effectiveness and gains of its partnerships by reducing transaction costs (both for UNHCR and others) through harmonisation and streamlining of coordination structures and identifying and better utilising the comparative advantage of other agencies.***

Conclusion 5 – POC accountability and responsiveness: UNHCR's programming has tended to be driven more by upwards accountability to funders than by downwards accountability to POCs and host communities, a constraint to UNHCR's responsiveness to the latter, and to effective programming. Means of sustaining ongoing and two-way communication are currently lacking between UNHCR and its implementing partners with those the agency is mandated to serve. Although UNHCR's needs assessments are broadly comprehensive, data and monitoring do not yet systematically address all aspects of vulnerability.

→ ***Recommendation 5: UNHCR should improve its downwards accountability by improving its responsiveness to the priorities and needs of POCs and host communities in line with the AGD policy.***

Conclusion 6 – Organisational effectiveness: Key aspects of UNHCR's core business systems emerge as a barrier to effectiveness and a source of frustration for those working at all levels of the organisation. A business transformation process is underway in line with global organisational reforms, but it is not evident that this will adequately address all of the country-specific concerns. Key priorities include: shifting the locus of decision-making close to the response, ensuring staffing is fit-for purpose with the right skill sets and contextual understanding, more timely procurement and release of budgets, more efficient contracting (PPA) systems, and stronger results management.

→ ***Recommendation 6: UNHCR should address organisational barriers to its programming effectiveness to create a more enabling environment, with an emphasis on HR, management***

issues including support to senior leadership, aspects of business transformation, and strengthened and more collaborative contingency planning.

Conclusion 7 – Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning: UNHCR's current MEL systems are inadequate to support strategic decision-making and a constraint to effective and responsive programming, due to a combination of insufficient investment in MEL and a results-based management system that fails to report on outcomes and impact and therefore assess effectiveness. A stronger learning culture within the organisation is essential to improving effectiveness.

→ **Recommendation 7: *UNHCR should develop and invest in a MEL system that is truly 'fit for purpose' and adequately staffed to support strategic decision-making***