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## **Asylum capacity development**

### *Summary*

This paper presents the organization's reinforced approach to strengthening national asylum systems. Central to this approach is a broader, more strategic framework for capacity development – one that is evidence-based, focused on delivering long-term impact and aimed at making asylum systems fairer, more efficient and adaptable to evolving displacement situations. In addition to providing an overview of the key elements of this approach, the paper also presents concrete examples of how UNHCR is putting this approach into practice.

## I. Introduction

1. Fair and efficient asylum procedures are essential to ensuring non-discriminatory access to asylum, enabling asylum-seekers to access protection, services and solutions. The implementation of fair and efficient procedures is also a requirement for States in fulfilling their obligations under international or regional refugee protection treaties. Quality asylum procedures reduce costs, alleviate demands on reception capacity, and facilitate return to their country of origin of those found not to be in need of international protection and who do not have a right to stay on other grounds.<sup>1</sup> While States hold the primary responsibility for assessing international protection needs, UNHCR may conduct refugee status determination in accordance with its mandate, in the absence of a fair and efficient asylum system.

2. In recent years, national asylum systems have been confronted with significant challenges, stemming from the increasing number of individuals seeking international protection. In 2024, 3.1 million new individual asylum applications were received and 1.6 million were granted refugee status, including under group-based processing. These high figures reflect both the increasing cross-border displacement driven by escalating violence and conflict as well as the significant numbers of individuals without international refugee protection needs, who have resorted to the asylum system to regularize their stay in the absence of alternative migration pathways. In contexts of mixed movements of refugees and migrants, the implementation of quality asylum procedures and rapid decision-making on asylum applications are essential across countries of asylum, transit and destination through a “whole-of-route” approach. This ensures that those in need of international protection are identified and supported – helping to prevent dangerous onward journeys – while those not in need of protection can be returned home, thereby easing pressure on asylum systems.

3. In line with the mandate of UNHCR and its supervisory responsibility under the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, supporting the establishment and strengthening of national asylum systems is one of the organization’s core competencies. The organization prioritizes strengthening the capacity of States to implement and manage quality asylum procedures that are fair, efficient, adaptable and function with integrity. To this end, UNHCR engages in capacity development activities with States and other stakeholders. These activities include providing advice on legal frameworks and supporting both institutional and individual capacity development. These efforts are undertaken in various contexts, including during transitions from UNHCR-conducted refugee status determination to nationally-led procedures, as well as in the facilitation of quality assurance initiatives.

## II. Challenges in strengthening asylum systems

4. Over the years, the support of UNHCR to States in developing their asylum capacity has contributed to notable progress – both in the number of operational national asylum systems as well as in the quality and capacity of these systems. However, significant challenges remain. Drawing on the organization’s extensive experience in strengthening national asylum systems, UNHCR has identified good practices in delivering support as well as recurring obstacles that hinder the long-term effectiveness of these systems. For instance, in certain contexts, initiatives have focused primarily on technical capacity development through training and learning, without addressing broader institutional and structural issues – ultimately limiting lasting impact. In other cases, national asylum systems have been developed relying heavily on humanitarian funding, preventing their full integration into national institutions. These observations have prompted UNHCR to reassess and refine its approach to supporting States, leading to the development of policies and guidance that adopt a more holistic approach and aim to foster more sustainable, integrated and resilient asylum systems.

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<sup>1</sup> The term “persons found not to be in need of international protection” refers to people who have had their claim for international protection finally rejected through fair and efficient asylum procedures. It does not apply to those who have had their claims rejected due to the application of safe third country or safe first country of asylum concepts, as they may nevertheless be in need of international protection.

5. As part of its efforts to improve support for national asylum systems, UNHCR commissioned an independent external evaluation, published in 2022, to assess the effectiveness of its work. The “UNHCR Asylum Capacity Development (ACD) Evaluation” confirmed many of the observations that UNHCR had identified internally. It recognized the ability of UNHCR to swiftly identify opportunities to strengthen asylum systems, but also pointed out areas for improvement. In particular, it noted that in some cases, UNHCR supported initiatives without fully considering how they would be sustained over time and how much ownership national actors had in the process. To address these challenges, the evaluation put forward 12 recommendations to enhance the organization’s support, making it more strategic, better structured and more effective. These included improving the implementation of initiatives that promote the sustainability of national ownership, investing in staff capacity and strengthening organizational learning.

### **III. UNHCR renewed approach to strengthening asylum systems**

6. As part of its renewed approach – and guided by the action plan developed in response to the evaluation’s recommendations – UNHCR has focused its support to asylum systems in five key areas: law and policy frameworks, institutional performance, procedural effectiveness, workforce capacities and effective participation of asylum-seekers through information and legal representation. Recognizing that a quality asylum system requires the involvement of many actors, UNHCR has also adopted a “whole-of-society” approach to strengthening national asylum systems. This includes engaging a wide range of stakeholders during the planning and implementation of its interventions, helping to ensure that reforms are inclusive, effective and sustainable in the long-term.

7. To complement efforts at the national level, UNHCR has also reinforced its regional and global engagement to support asylum systems more effectively. In this context, UNHCR expanded the activities of the Asylum Capacity Support Group, an initiative established under the Global Compact on Refugees. Among its core functions, the group facilitates partnerships between States and other stakeholders, drawing on the 135 pledges related to asylum capacity made at the 2019 and 2023 Global Refugee Forums. As the Secretariat of the group, UNHCR launched a dialogue platform – a virtual space designed to foster exchange of knowledge and expertise among States and stakeholders in addressing common challenges faced by asylum systems globally. Through this platform, four technical dialogues have been convened, focusing on key thematic areas such as legal advice and representation, advanced case management systems, and the simplification of asylum procedures to enhance their fairness and efficiency.

8. In parallel, UNHCR has enhanced its engagement with regional mechanisms, including the comprehensive regional protection and solutions framework (known by its Spanish acronym, MIRPS) in the Americas; regional economic communities in Africa, such as the East African Community, the Economic Community of West African States and the Southern African Development Community; as well as with institutions in Europe, such as the European Union Agency for Asylum. This strengthened engagement aims at complementing and amplifying support to national asylum institutions through coordinated and regionally-tailored efforts.

9. UNHCR has also systematically provided technical support and advice on the five key areas. The organization has, for example, issued recommendations to improve asylum decision-making processes as part of its review of asylum legislation in countries such as Benin, Botswana, Egypt, Iraq and Somalia. To support the sustainable transition of refugee status determination responsibilities, UNHCR has also worked closely with the Governments of Egypt and Somalia to strengthen their operational capacity. Additionally, in West and Central Africa, UNHCR convened a meeting of national asylum institutions to provide guidance on budgeting and planning for asylum systems. Furthermore, UNHCR has provided targeted support to national asylum systems in numerous countries such as Cameroon, Chad, Colombia, Costa Rica, Italy, South Africa and Zambia. This support has focused on strengthening their workforce capacities, improving procedures and systems as well as enhancing communication and engagement with affected populations.

10. UNHCR has also contributed to strengthening institutional performance through quality assurance initiatives and developing tools and guidance. In the area of procedural fairness and efficiency, UNHCR has documented good practices by national asylum authorities to improve the effective processing of asylum applications through greater national ownership in its report “Effective Processing of Asylum Applications”. UNHCR has also published guidance on the implementation of differentiated asylum case processing modalities, which are essential to effectively process asylum applications. Additionally, and to support evidence-based programming, UNHCR launched a practical “how to guide” for conducting asylum capacity self-assessments, offering a flexible, hands-on methodology to help governments identify capacity gaps in their asylum systems.<sup>2</sup>

11. UNHCR developed a learning package to strengthen the ability of its staff members to effectively and sustainably support the capacity development of asylum systems. As of June 2025, 128 UNHCR staff members had completed the training, establishing a strong foundation for interventions with long-term impact. In addition, key tools were made available to guide staff in planning and implementing capacity development activities. These tools ensure a consistent, structured and best-practice approach when engaging with States.

12. Recognizing the significant potential of emerging technologies to improve the efficiency of the asylum process, UNHCR continues to explore the use of artificial intelligence in a protection-sensitive and ethically responsible manner. To this end, UNHCR commissioned a paper on leveraging the potential of artificial intelligence for research on country of origin information and is exploring artificial intelligence applications in the asylum process – particularly in areas such as translations, transcription and process analysis.

#### **IV. Toward more strategic and sustainable engagement**

13. As part of its commitment to deliver sustainable responses, UNHCR is developing a new strategy to guide its reinforced engagement in strengthening national asylum systems, which will be released in late 2025. The strategy aims to create a more favourable protection environment for refugees and asylum-seekers. Its overarching goal is to ensure that a greater proportion of asylum-seekers benefit from fair and efficient asylum systems by 2030. Informed by consultations with stakeholders through the Asylum Capacity Support Group, the strategy draws on best-practice development approaches to achieve long-term change.

14. As part of the new strategy, UNHCR will prioritize interventions aimed at enhancing the long-term sustainability of asylum systems. Key areas of focus will include more efficient decision-making processes; supporting robust budgeting and planning; ensuring asylum institutions fully implement asylum procedures and concentrate on core protection functions; and developing processing capacities that are sustainable over time. A central pillar of the strategy will be the meaningful engagement of asylum applicants in procedures that affect them, thereby reinforcing transparency and accountability throughout the process. Additionally, effective human resource planning will be crucial, ensuring the recruitment, development and retention of qualified staff.

15. To operationalize the strategy, UNHCR will implement priority actions and enablers to support States and other stakeholders. It will reinforce its role as thought leader; enhance its capacity to deliver structured, sustainable, context-specific interventions using the capacity development approach; and explore the use of technology for early collection and protection-sensitive use of data and innovation. The strategy will promote multi-stakeholder advocacy and action, encouraging cross-sectoral learning, knowledge exchange and the inclusion of a broader range of actors, including development partners. The implementation of the strategy will be context-specific, with interventions tailored to the specific strengths, challenges and needs of each national asylum system.

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<sup>2</sup> Available from <https://www.refworld.org/policy/opguidance/unhcr/2024/en/149184>.

## V. Conclusion

16. The work of UNHCR on asylum capacity development is central to the organization's shift toward sustainable responses and development-oriented approaches – both of which emphasize the importance of national ownership and long-term impact. The strategic engagement outlined in this paper lays the foundation for the forthcoming strategy on strengthening national asylum systems, aiming to enhance the ability of UNHCR to support States in navigating complex and evolving challenges. Fair, efficient and adaptable asylum systems, which function with integrity, are not only critical for ensuring access to protection but also for enabling durable solutions for refugees, especially in the context of increasingly complex and mixed movements.

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