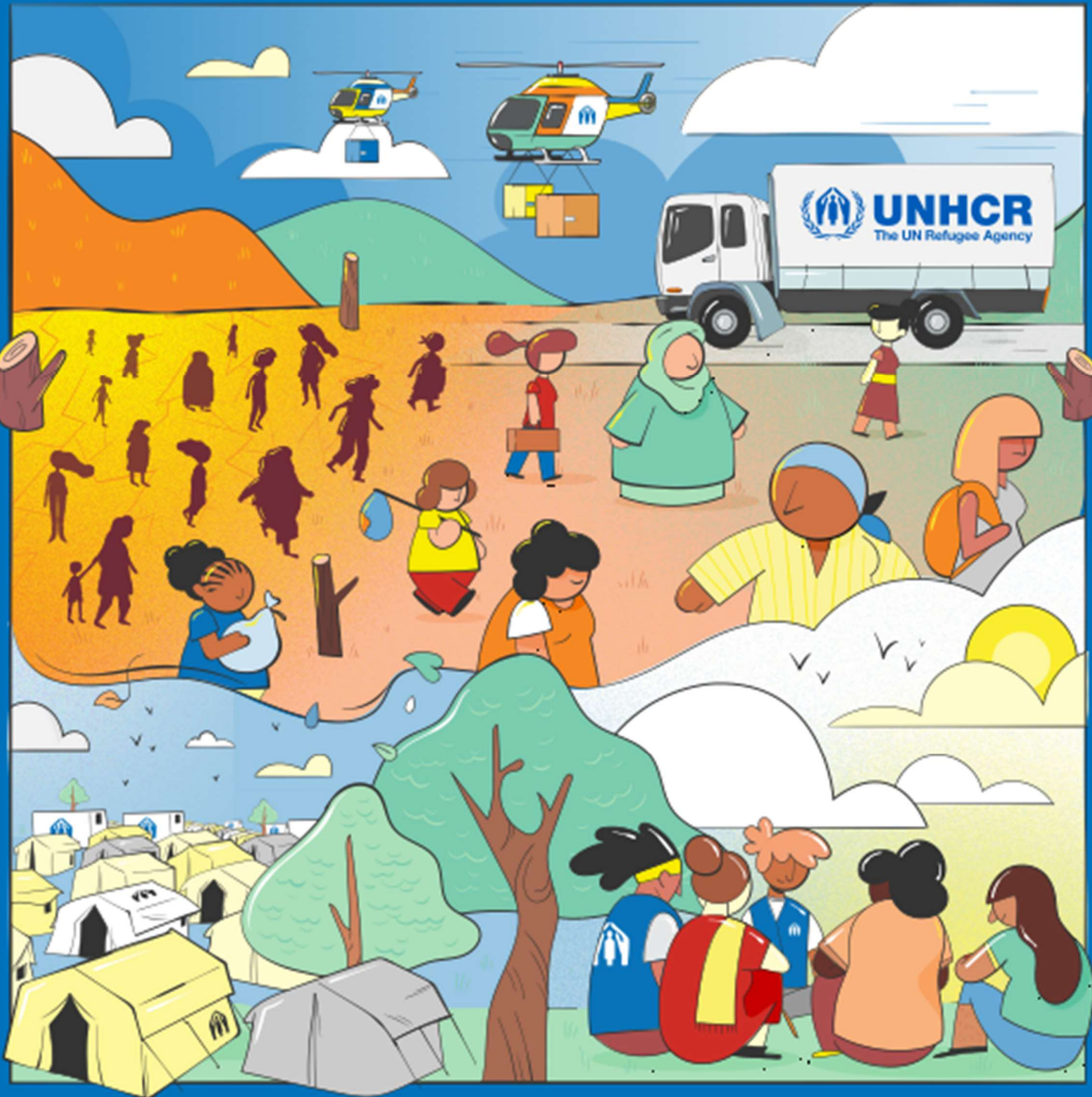


Evaluation of UNHCR's Multi-country L3 Emergency Response to the Sudan Situation **Executive Summary**



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In alignment with its Policy on Emergency Preparedness and Response, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) Evaluation Office (EVO) commissioned Key Aid Consulting to conduct a centralized evaluation of UNHCR's Level 3 (L3) Emergency Response to the Sudan Situation. The evaluation examines UNHCR's response from July 2023 to June 2024 across four countries—Chad, Egypt, South Sudan and Sudan.

The evaluation is both summative and formative, aiming to assess UNHCR's response while identifying lessons learned and areas for improvement. The analysis is guided by six core evaluation questions:

- **Relevance:** To what extent were UNHCR's interventions appropriate to the needs, vulnerabilities and capacities of forcibly displaced persons and stateless people?
- **Effectiveness:** How well did UNHCR's interventions meet their intended objectives and address the evolving humanitarian crisis?
- **Efficiency:** Were UNHCR's interventions timely and cost-effective in their design and delivery?
- **Coordination:** How effectively did UNHCR coordinate with national governments, humanitarian actors and other stakeholders to maximize impact?
- **Sustainability:** What measures did UNHCR put in place to support durable solutions and longer-term development linkages?
- **Cross-cutting themes:** To what extent did UNHCR mainstream gender, Accountability to Affected Populations and protection principles in its interventions?

The evaluation follows a mixed-method approach, integrating both primary and secondary data. The methodology includes document reviews, 214 key informant interviews with UNHCR staff, implementing partners, government officials and sector representatives, 55 focus group discussions with refugees and host communities, and three targeted online surveys with UNHCR staff, sector members and implementing partners. Field visits were conducted in Chad and Egypt, the designated deep-dive countries, while data from Sudan and South Sudan were gathered remotely, as they were classified as light-touch countries within the evaluation scope.

On 15 April 2023, conflict broke out in Sudan as tensions escalated between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), triggering a severe, multidimensional forced displacement and humanitarian crisis.

The Sudan war caused the world's largest internal displacement and a major refugee situation. As of 3 November 2024, over 11 million people have been displaced by the conflict, including 8.16 million internally and 3 million who fled outside the country in search of safety and security (including refugees, asylum-seekers and migrant returnees) in neighbouring countries, including Egypt, Chad, the Central African Republic, South Sudan, Ethiopia, Libya and Uganda.

In each of the countries, UNHCR and its partners set up a large response across different sectors and activities, despite significant underfunding. In 2024, out of USD 350m. received, the largest proportion of UNHCR's interventions prioritised life-saving activities in protection, shelter, well-being/basic needs, including distribution of Core Relief Items

(CRIs) and Cash-Based Interventions (CBI). In the period May 2023-June 2024, UNHCR and its partners registered more than 1 million asylum-seekers and refugees.

KEY FINDINGS

Relevance

UNHCR's interventions were broadly relevant and aligned with the needs of displaced populations, focusing on protection, shelter and basic services. Through robust data collection mechanisms, UNHCR effectively identified urgent needs and designed targeting strategies that were largely appropriate. The activities and modalities used in the response were relevant to the Sudan Situation, addressing both immediate and evolving needs. To enhance the contextual relevance of its interventions, UNHCR actively engaged with governments, local authorities and displaced communities, fostering social cohesion and strengthening national response mechanisms. Additionally, UNHCR has broadly adhered to the humanitarian principles of humanity, impartiality and neutrality in its response efforts.

However, gaps in relevance remained. A significant proportion of recipients lacked awareness of the targeting criteria applied in assistance distribution, leading to perceptions of unfairness. While there was evidence of programmatic adaptations to changing circumstances, these adaptations were often constrained by insufficient monitoring and funding. Insufficient monitoring remained, in fact, a factor limiting the relevance of interventions: activities were not systematically monitored, the data were often inconsistent and not sufficiently used. Across all countries, the lack of documented analysis on how data shaped strategies and interventions was notable. Furthermore, while UNHCR adhered to humanitarian principles such as humanity and impartiality, there was limited evidence on how discussions regarding these principles influenced operational decisions, and specific instances where their application could have been improved were not systematically documented.

Effectiveness

The organization played a vital role in multiple sectors, including protection, shelter/core relief items (CRIs), cash-based interventions (CBI), and health and education. Notably, there was a significant scale-up in life-saving activities to address immediate humanitarian needs. While UNHCR achieved notable successes, certain sectors faced challenges. In shelter and CRIs, issues related to both quality and quantity were evident, largely due to funding constraints. In registration and protection services, the overwhelming volume of needs hampered the ability to achieve full coverage.

The evaluation team faced limitations in conducting a comprehensive comparative effectiveness analysis across countries and years due to two main factors: The deep dive versus light-touch country approach, which affected data availability and depth of analysis, and inconsistent monitoring and evaluation (M&E) frameworks between 2023 and 2024, making direct comparisons difficult.

Some unintended effects of UNHCR's interventions were identified, though their overall impact remained minimal. Examples include fostering social cohesion in Chad and the unintended consequence of prolonged registration procedures increasing vulnerability in Egypt.

A critical constraint across all four countries was insufficient funding, affecting UNHCR and all Regional Refugee Response Plan (RRRP) partners. As of November 2024, the Sudan RRRP received only 30 per cent of the required funding for 2024 and 38 per cent in 2023. The RRRP financing per country remains equal to or below 50 per cent across 2023 and 2024, while the Sudan Humanitarian and Needs Response Plan (HNRP) financing rate was a bit higher in 2024.

Considering this, UNHCR has been proactive in seeking additional funding, through extensive advocacy and donor diversification. Advocacy was shown by the numerous conferences, events and high-level visits organized in the four countries by different offices, as well as the supporting information products and fundraising documents developed by UNHCR. UNHCR also sought to capitalize on existing donors and diversify its donor base, seeking new non-traditional donors such as the governments of Gulf countries. Despite this, persistent resourcing gaps continued to impact the overall effectiveness of the response.

Efficiency

The response was timely given the complexity and rapid evolution of the crisis, facilitated by emergency protocols, HR rosters, pre-existing partnerships and strategic activity design. Delays in timeliness were primarily due to logistical bottlenecks, funding shortages, increasing caseloads and technical challenges. Centralized processes, such as biometric registration, enhanced operational efficiency but created accessibility barriers in remote areas.

A case study from Chad indicates that while UNHCR attempted to incorporate some cost-efficiency measures in its response, it lacks a systematic approach to embedding cost-efficiency in decision-making and programme design. UNHCR's security and access measures were generally robust, adapted to country-specific challenges, and supported by Regional Bureaux and HQ. However, the organization lacks a formal access guidance.

Coordination

UNHCR's leadership in coordinating the refugee response through the Refugee Coordination Model (RCM) was relevant but faced challenges due to overlaps with other coordination structures, inter-agency tensions and gaps in global coordination with International Organization for Migration (IOM). The RCM was seen as overly UNHCR-centric, with concerns over transparency, data-sharing, and its dual role as both coordinator and last-resort provider and thus actively seeking funding.

Despite these challenges, the RCM was effective in establishing coordination structures, sharing information and mobilizing resources. However, limited strategic discussions, inconsistent local NGO and government participation, and difficulties securing sector co-leads' commitments remained issues. The RRRP was perceived as a useful tool for mobilizing resources, although it struggled with inadequate funding and overlapped with other humanitarian plans. The RRRP was less useful for planning, as it lacked detailed needs analysis and operational details on programmatic strategies. The newly released 2024 RCM guidance is likely to fill these gaps.

Regarding internal coordination, UNHCR's emergency response in Chad, Egypt, South Sudan and Sudan benefited significantly from regional bureaux (RB) and HQ support, particularly in the initial stages of the response. The support provided by the RBs was especially critical given the scale of the response and limited availability of funding, which impacted staffing levels in the four countries. Operational coordination, however, faced challenges, including incomplete cross-functional processes and issues with cross-border operations.

Durable Solutions

Durable solutions for refugees and internally displaced persons (IDP) in the Sudan crisis remain limited, with UNHCR issuing a non-return advisory in June 2023. Resettlement is the only viable option but remains small in scale. Despite this, UNHCR has adopted a “solutions from the start” approach, integrating durable solutions into planning, coordination, and national frameworks, such as asylum laws in Chad and Egypt, and South Sudan’s National Durable Solutions Strategy.

The response demonstrated the relevance of the nexus approach in both emergencies and protracted crises. UNHCR engaged development actors, including joint initiatives with the World Bank and United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and prioritized resilience building. However, the implementation faced obstacles, including limited development funding, humanitarian prioritization, protection challenges (notably in Egypt), and unclear integration of the nexus into the RCM and RRRP.

Cross-Cutting Themes

Protection, gender and accountability mechanisms were incorporated into UNHCR’s response, with notable efforts to mitigate gender-based violence risks. However, gaps persisted in participatory engagement and the implementation of feedback mechanisms, limiting Accountability to Affected People (AAP). In fact, UNHCR did not ensure sufficient feedback to forcibly displaced and stateless persons, and their participation in the design and delivery of assistance was limited.

CONCLUSIONS

The full report includes a detailed narrative for each of the conclusions and recommendations that are discussed below:

1. UNHCR demonstrated some capacity to scale up, deliver and steer a timely and relevant regional response in a very challenging context, although these challenges are expected to persist.
2. UNHCR delivered contextually relevant emergency interventions based on the needs of forcibly displaced and stateless persons, and has simultaneously and rapidly incorporated the Humanitarian-Development-Peace nexus (HDPN) approach to ensure a long-term strategic approach, although the results of this are yet to materialize.
3. The scale of the UNHCR response was hindered by insufficient funding, which highlighted the challenges of how best to prioritize programmatic interventions in a resource-scarce environment.
4. Investment in the RCM rendered coordination generally effective, although inconsistent participation and its coexistence with other coordination mechanisms raised questions about the appropriateness of its roll-out in some countries. The newly released 2024 RCM guidance is expected to address some of these gaps.
5. The lack of certain types of data and insufficient analysis by UNHCR hindered strategic, programmatic and operational decisions-making related to the design of interventions, the prioritization of the response and accountability to aid recipients.
6. UNHCR worked well regionally across three regional bureaux, providing technical resources and expertise to the Country Offices (CO) albeit raising some interoperability issues.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Drawing from the findings and conclusions, the evaluation has identified five overarching recommendations. The full report includes a detailed narrative of each recommendation as well as suggested actions.

Recommendation 1: UNHCR should expand minimum requirements for monitoring to ensure that they are the same across all forms of material assistance provided by UNHCR to ensure inclusive and results-driven responses, with a focus on regular data collection, real-time analysis and effective communication with affected populations.

Recommendation 2: UNHCR should strengthen its approach to prioritization by establishing, within its planning and programme development procedures, clear criteria and procedures to prioritize sectors, activities, modalities and vulnerable populations in order to justify the allocation of resources and to inform operations for the Sudan Situation as well as future L3 emergencies. This applies to UNHCR as coordinator of the response as well as UNHCR as last-resort provider in emergency as well as non-emergency settings.

Recommendation 3: UNHCR should invest in the roll-out and implementation of the new RCM Guidance to improve aspects related to the participation in the RCM, the RRRP process, and the interactions with other coordination mechanisms in mixed settings.

Recommendation 4: UNHCR should further integrate resilience and sustainable responses in the design of L3 scaled-up responses, notably via the selection of response modalities at area level, to better address the long-term needs of acute crises from the outset through the nexus approach.

Recommendation 5: UNHCR should capitalize on the cross-regional ways of working put in place for the Sudan situation (contingency planning, cross-border operations and regional communication plans) so that good practices and lessons learned can be adopted in future L3 responses.