

Independent Evaluation of Data Systems in MENA: Multi-country evaluation of phone-based contact centres - EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background

1. The multi-country evaluation of phone-based contact centres (PBCCs) was commissioned by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) Middle East and North Africa (MENA) Regional Bureau (RB), managed by the Evaluation Office (EvO) and undertaken by IOD PARC. It considered the relevance, efficiency, effectiveness, coherence, and strategic positioning of UNHCR's approach and utilization of PBCCs. The purpose of the evaluation was to identify lessons and good practices to inform the development and strategic positioning of PBCCs as part of UNHCR's approaches to Accountability to Affected People (AAP).
2. The scope of the evaluation spanned 2021-24. Data was drawn from six country studies in Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Iraq, Libya, Mauritania, and Tunisia, and from a range of regional and global interviews. A total of 230 participants, including 102 forcibly displaced and stateless people (FDSP) were involved in the evaluation as key informants. Refugee engagement was a priority for the evaluation methodology and included debriefing sessions to validate emerging findings, engagement in the co-production of recommendations, as well as in focus group discussions (FGDs) and interviews. The report presents 21 key findings, 5 conclusions and 8 recommendations.

Context

3. The country operations (COs) considered in the evaluation have quite distinct and dynamic contexts. Four of the COs were primarily serving refugees and asylum seekers, with Iraq and Libya being characterized by a significant Internally Displaced Person (IDP) population. Of the six countries studied, only Jordan had a relatively stable population served by UNHCR for the time period 2021-24. Iraq experienced a decrease in the number of IDPs. Other countries saw increased numbers with new arrivals of FDSP due to escalation of conflict in Sudan and Mali, as well as changes in the settlement patterns of FDSP within countries as people moved between locations.
4. The PBCC models across the six countries were similarly diverse, as they evolved in response to learning and developments in both the country contexts and available technology options. PBCC comprise call centres, hotlines and helplines and are an important tool for UNHCR Accountability to Affected People (AAP) with potential to facilitate communication and transparency. The subject of calls varies by context but often relates to requests for registration, protection and cash services.
5. Some of the key features distinguishing the PBCCs across the six countries include the following organizational factors:
 - a) Whether UNHCR runs a system in-house (e.g., Jordan) or contracted it out to another organization, such as a non-governmental organization (NGO) (e.g., in Libya).
 - b) Whether UNHCR runs one central PBCC (e.g., Jordan) or also supported additional hotlines often run by implementing partners, sometimes offering specialist services,

such as relating to cash-based initiatives (CBIs), health, or legal services (e.g., in Egypt and Mauritania).

c) Whether a system is interagency and what that means , i.e., whether it was (i) the entry point for UNHCR and only its implementing partners (e.g. Egypt) or (ii) a collective service for other UN organizations accessible to the full range of people they served, (e.g., the Iraq Information Centre up until 2022).

d) Whether the system is centralized i.e. located in/managed as one centralized service center (e.g., Egypt and Jordan) or decentralized systems, with different systems in specific geographic areas, such as in Iraq since 2022 and Mauritania up until 2024. Decentralized systems can be run by UNHCR, a partner, or both.

Findings

Relevance

6. PBCC have generally been accessible to most people served by UNHCR providing an inclusive channel for FDSP to access UNHCR though there is some preference for communication through social media from younger populations and for face-to-face contact for older people and those with special needs. At times of high demand or limited capacity gaining access to a line or operator has been extremely difficult with callers choosing to pay for third parties' help or using bots to get through to the PBCC. Technology options such as the use of interactive voice response (IVR) both enhanced access to PBCCs and presented some challenges, with some people adapting to its use and some facing difficulties inputting data. Government restrictions on phone or SIM card purchase restricts PBCC access in some contexts.
7. COs had systems to maintain information bases through knowledge platforms and frequently-asked-question (FAQ) resources with liaison across CO and engagement with FDSP key enablers to ensure its relevance. However, these can take time to adapt in times of change and smaller operations tended to have less systematic knowledge bases. In some countries, notably in the more centralized systems, callers found the localized information less adequate for their purposes.

Efficiency

8. UNHCR has been making clear efforts to support the efficiency of PBCC set-ups and processes across the various models. UNHCR COs are drawing on learning from the RB and other COs in the design and management of their PBCCs. Ongoing learning enabled processes to be continually improved.
9. UNHCR's PBCCs tended to be operating at full capacity. Some struggle to meet the demand for the many roles they are asked to fulfil as a channel for all four AAP actions (information, feedback, communication and transparency and program learning and adaptation) as well as being an entry point in some contexts for registration and other services. The processes for receiving calls, handling data and requests, and making referrals were usually efficient. Processes for referrals and data handling were found to be less efficient in the COs using hotlines and helplines rather than call centres.

10. UNHCR makes good use of technologies and systems to streamline and automate workflows to reduce the burden on call operators and to process as many calls as possible. The Refugee Assistance Information System (RAIS) is a tool that is consistently used and is a key driver of efficiency.¹ However, improving process efficiency for UNHCR sometimes comes at the expense of efficiency and satisfaction for the FDSP callers. For example, while IVR makes it more efficient for UNHCR to process calls, callers expressed a preference for engaging directly with a call agent (PBCC operator).
11. UNHCR's management of cost-efficiency is impeded by data limitations such as regular gaps in analysis of indirect costs and costs of additional hotlines set up for specific programmes (e.g., CBIs and health or legal services). This also limited the evaluation team's ability to compare the cost efficiency of different models. Other data limitations also contributed to this, such as the limited data on the number of people unable to access the PBCCs and limitations in the quality of data on FDSP users' gender and other characteristics.

Effectiveness

12. PBCCs are asked to fulfil a wide range of roles. The primary objectives of PBCCs in specific contexts and times were rarely explicitly defined, making it difficult to assess their effectiveness. PBCCs play a clear role during emergency response when there are rapidly increasing FDSP populations. PBCCs enable access to registration and other services though developments in other communication channels, including UNHCR's Digital Gateway, may change this. While FDSP are appreciative of PBCC services and quality particularly being able to talk with an operator when they gain access, most COs at the functional unit struggle to respond to the scale of referrals they receive from the PBCC. This is especially the case when FDSP populations are large and units' resources are limited. In these instances, PBCCs are not effective in closing feedback loops. There is limited communication back to FDSP on their actions due to capacity constraints meaning that FDSP are not easily able to find out progress on their query. The key factors influencing FDSP satisfaction levels with PBCC is waiting time, quality of operators' interaction, relevance of information PBCC provides and speed of follow-up to their queries.
13. Appropriate internal information management systems for PBCCs were found to be in place and being used in most countries. They are critical in securely centralizing personal and case information in one place and in ensuring that these can be accessed in a smooth and efficient manner. In operations where data is not stored on proper information systems there were found to be some challenges to data security, such as risks of identity fraud, unauthorized access, or data breaches and these tended to be more apparent on hotlines and helplines than fully-fledged call centres. There are mixed views on the best approach to identity verification with data security measures impeding some people's access to the PBCC.
14. PBCC data are used to analyse patterns and trends in queries and their relation to the scale and location of UNHCR services. However, there is limited evidence that UNHCR combines this data with feedback from other communication channels to assess and improve program or service quality. This integration could address broader questions

¹The Refugee Assistance Information System (RAIS) is a custom-built web application, developed in-house by RB MENA. It allows UNHCR and partner staff to record activities and coordinate assistance, allowing staff and partners to be better equipped to respond to needs and engage in case management across a) large and diverse populations and b) diverse information and communication channels.

beyond just the PBCC, encompassing all AAP data. Feedback on the PBCC itself. has been received and acted upon

15. CO monitoring of effectiveness is limited with most COs focused on volume of calls handled and individual operator performance rather than the PBCC outcomes. There is less attention to indicators such the responsiveness of PBCCs, action following referral and their contribution to protection outcomes. The evaluation found limited evidence that PBCCs are being monitored to improve their role in two-way communication and their role in building trust despite trust in the PBCC being found to impact on levels of trust in UNHCR. Some COs are working to establish systems to track more closely CO actions responding to caller queries and these show potential.

Coherence

16. UNHCR staff's awareness of the strengths and limitations of the PBCC in their country context and for some specific groups has enabled PBCCs to be appropriately used as part of the wider communication and transparency ecosystem. However the priority role of the PBCC vis-à-vis other AAP methods was rarely made explicit. The challenges that FDSP faced to reach PBCC operators suggests greater prioritisation or resourcing is needed.
17. The evaluation found strong links between PBCC and COs functional units and partners regarding information and training. However, there was found to be less systematic connectedness regarding partners' own hotlines, even when supported by UNHCR. When there was significant investment in interagency coordination for AAP, there were evident benefits for the coherence of UNHCR's PBCC at the sectoral level.

Strategic Positioning

18. While there are clear lessons being learned from UNHCR's experiences across countries and models, they do not translate automatically into a blueprint for any particular context given the range and dynamism of the variables relevant to UNHCR CO decisions. Data gaps in cost-effectiveness of different models including inter-agency models also challenge decision-making to optimize resources.
19. Horizon scanning helped UNHCR to anticipate some implications of changes in context and technology. Senior management support was found to be essential to galvanize the necessary cross-CO resources and inputs to ensure PBCCs' effectiveness in changing context e.g. new population movements. However, PBCCs adaptation to evolving contexts or technology changes have tended to be time consuming and impeded by slow decision-making particularly when there are resource allocation implications. Managing changes has been more effective when iterative processes involve both users and UNHCR multi-functional teams from across the CO.

Conclusions

20. PBCCs form a relevant and important part of the AAP eco-system enabling inclusive FDSP access to UNHCR including for information and access to services. An up-to-date knowledge base including localised information has proven vital and is aided by engagement with FDSP including specialised groups working with people with specific needs and vulnerabilities as well as supported by input from across the UNHCR CO and good inter-agency cooperation.

21. PBCC play a crucial role in enabling FDSP communication with UNHCR. Nonetheless many systems are under considerable pressure particularly when FDSP populations are rising and there is high demand for certain services notably for registration appointments. Efficiency improvements have been enabled through good use of technology and continual learning. Developments in technology, notably UNHCR's Digital Gateway, have implications for the future roles of PBCC and may help relieve some pressure on PBCC allowing it to focus on areas where two-way communication is best deployed. However, managing adaptation to changing contexts though aided by horizon scanning and scenario planning has proven difficult with limited measures in place to enable rapid scale up or down.
22. Data gathered through PBCC has been used mainly to track macro-level trends in volume of calls handled, referral rates and used to refer individual queries to relevant functions rather than also being collated and analysed for program learning and adaptation. Even in relation to individual callers, management data usually track referral rates much better than action taken in response to the callers' queries making management, and evaluation of PBCC's effectiveness in terms of its contribution to the four AAP actions and protection outcomes difficult. Evolving monitoring methods in some COs shows potential.
23. Satisfaction with PBCC has been limited by long waiting times, limited communication with FDSP to close feedback loops and CO limited capacity to cope with the large volume of FDSP queries raised particularly in times of change. This suggests the need for more focused prioritisation of the role of PBCC in specific contexts.
24. However, FDSP positive assessment of a) operator quality, itself supported by good training and support for the operators b) the provision of interpreters and c) the importance of a direct channel for access to relevant information and services such as registration appointments and protection and program advice demonstrates their value as a channel for two-way communication with FDSP. PBCC are demonstrating a clear role in communication and transparency.
25. Management of PBCC has been rigorous on some levels e.g. monitoring operator quality and call handling volume and length but limited by data gaps particularly relating to costs and effectiveness. A limitation has been that monitoring and management has been skewed towards efficiency rather than linked with effectiveness indicators such as quality of user experience and PBCC's contribution to AAP and protection outcomes.
26. As all agencies face funding pressures and technological opportunities, interagency cooperation on broader AAP will shape UNHCR's approach to collective PBCC engagement in different contexts. External trends highlight the need for UNHCR to position itself as a reliable and visible interagency actor, particularly through data sharing and collaboration.
27. While there are clear lessons from each model of PBCC, there is no blue-print for PBCC across context types, all models need some tailoring at country level. Key factors to influence choice and adaptation of PBCC models including trends in populations served by UNHCR, extent to which UNHCR wants to use the PBCC to build a direct relationship with FDSP e.g. in difficult to access contexts, . technology available, quality of inter-agency cooperation and other communication channels available and their relative roles, costs and accessibility.

Recommendations

28. **Recommendation 1. Strategic aims and priorities:** Make explicit the aim(s) of the PBCC in each specific country context in terms of its strategic objectives, priority services and functions, and review this annually as well for emergency responses involving a multi-functional team.
29. **Recommendation 2. Preparedness for change:** Build into the design and development of each PBCC preparedness for changes in context, technology and levels of demand for PBCC services.
30. **Recommendation 3. Ensuring the accessibility and relevance of PBCC information and services:** Ensure participation of FDSP in the design stage of PBCCs to identify community priorities, barriers to access and measures to overcome them, as well as to ensure the relevance of PBCC information and services.
31. **Recommendation 4. Tailoring standards for efficiency:** Building on global level guidance, adapt and implement an approach and standards across the region for efficiency that drive the PBCC's strategic purpose, whilst upholding UNHCR's mandate and a high-quality service for FDSP service users. Ensure that efficiency standards and approaches are tailored to the PBCC's role and strategic purpose within a specific context.
32. **Recommendation 5. Management of PBCC for cost-effectiveness:** Enhance the management of PBCC through a focus on cost-effectiveness that combines holistic analysis of costs and efficiency together with analysis of PBCC effectiveness in terms of outcomes including user satisfaction; referral rates, accuracy and action; effectiveness of feedback loop; and PBCC's contribution to protection outcomes.
33. **Recommendation 6. Use of data for program learning and adaptation:** Enhance the use of PBCC data for learning and program adaptation by undertaking more in-depth analyses and its integration with other feedback data.
34. **Recommendation 7. Positioning and interagency cooperation:** Position UNHCR in each country and locally as a visible and active interagency actor in relation to PBCCs e.g. by sharing data and analysis, co-leading AAP/Communicating with Communities (CWC) working groups.
35. **Recommendation 8. Sharing lessons and promoting learning globally:** Feed key findings, lessons and good practices from this regional evaluation into global tools, guidance and positioning, as appropriate.