Country Strategy Evaluation

Somalia 2020 - 2024

Executive Summary

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UNHCR Evaluation Office

UNHCR's Evaluation Policy confirms UNHCR's commitment to support accountability, learning and continual improvement through the systematic examination and analysis of organizational policies, strategies, and programmes. Evaluations are guided by the principles of impartiality, credibility and utility, and are undertaken to enhance the organization's performance in addressing the protection, assistance and solution needs of refugees, stateless people and other forcibly displaced populations.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Evaluation information at a glance	
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Region:	UNHCR's Regional Bureau for the East, Horn of Africa and Great Lakes Region
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

This Country Strategy Evaluation (CSE) examines UNHCR's strategy, portfolio and performance in Somalia between January 2020 and December 2024. It assesses UNHCR's strategic positioning, operational relevance, and comparative advantage in supporting forcibly displaced and stateless populations. The evaluation has a strong focus on learning and accountability, and is formative in nature, aiming to generate practical insights for the formulation of the next Multi-Year Strategic Plan (MYSP). It will also contribute to discussions surrounding the 2026–2030 United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (UNSDCF).

Since January 2025, UNHCR has been facing a period of financial uncertainty, owing primarily to the freeze on all foreign aid decided by the United States – historically, its biggest donor. This led to a delay in the formulation of the new multi-year strategic plan (MYSP) to 2026.

The scope of the evaluation spans UNHCR's entire operational portfolio in Somalia, including regular programmes and emergency responses. It encompasses all forcibly displaced groups, host communities, and UNHCR's fitness for purpose to deliver its strategic vision. The analysis also considers UNHCR's alignment with Somalia's national development priorities, regional and global commitments, and UNHCR's own strategic objectives.

The evaluation employed a participatory approach, structured around four key evaluation questions broken into eighteen sub-questions aligned with the evaluation criteria defined by the Development Assistance Committee of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (relevance, coherence, effectiveness, and efficiency), and supported by a reconstructed Theory of Change and evaluation matrix. The evaluation designed four case studies to guide planning, data collection and analysis, and to triangulate desk analyses with primary data. A total of 156 semi-structured interviews were conducted across six locations (Mogadishu, Baidoa, Dollow, Galkayo, Hargeisa, and Kismayo). Site visits were undertaken between November and December 2024, followed by consultation processes supported by UNHCR staff.

The evaluation encountered some limitations, including insecurity and restricted access in certain regions, high staff turnover, and gaps in UNHCR's data and monitoring frameworks. Despite these challenges, the evaluation presents an evidence-based assessment, triangulated through field observation, stakeholder consultation, and document review. Quality assurance was guided by UNHCR and United Nations Evaluation Group (UNEG) standards, with adherence to ethical guidelines, confidentiality protocols, and principles of transparency and inclusion throughout the process.

FINDINGS

Relevance

UNHCR's programming in Somalia broadly aligns with national priorities, regional frameworks, and global commitments, including Somalia's National Development Plan, Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) protocols, regional frameworks and the Global Compact for Refugees. The organisation's evolving strategic posture reflects an intent to transition from emergency relief to more sustainable, solutions-oriented programming. However, persistent challenges — such as insecurity, limited access to rural areas, the complex political environment,

fragmented data, government capacity, and declining international resources, continue to hinder a full focus on resilience.

Efforts to tailor assistance to Somalia's dynamic context have included the adoption of conflict- and climate-sensitive programming, however, an urban bias in aid delivery has inadvertently deepened disparities with rural areas. Many IDPs in rural and hard-to-reach areas remain underserved. The urban-centric focus has resulted in unintended consequences, such as increased conflict, poverty and environmental degradation (contrary to UNHCR's Focus Area on Climate Change), especially in already overstretched urban centres.

The growing acceptance of Area-Based approaches[1] shows significant promise in addressing these imbalances by enabling more contextually grounded, locally driven, and climate-sensitive interventions. It facilitates collaboration with national and sub-national authorities and has the potential to improve relevance by strengthening protection, for example, through community-based protection and improving information flow from under-served areas. However, full realisation of this approach is constrained by cumbersome inter-agency coordination mechanisms.

Although UNHCR's programming incorporates global priorities such as those outlined in the Policy on Engagement in Situations of Internal Displacement, and visions for long-term solutions, budgetary allocations have remained largely skewed toward lifesaving and protection activities. Despite corporate efforts to provide guidance (for example 2024 Sustainable Programming Note, 2024 Explainer for UNHCR Operations), funding priorities have not meaningfully shifted to support resilience at scale, economic inclusion, or national systems development over the evaluation period, in spite of the objective contained in the MYSP.[2]

UNHCR Somalia's use of evidence is shaped by rapid assessments, participatory exercises, and post-distribution monitoring. While these tools offer valuable insights, the lack of cohesive monitoring systems and inconsistencies in data collection and quality, which is particularly mandate-critical in the case of implementing partner reporting, undermine adaptive management, and the reliability and optimisation of programme design and delivery. Coordination with partners, especially through tri-cluster leadership offers strategic reach. However, over time, a more directive and decreasing number of operational partnerships, intended to streamline management and oversight of the operation, has weakened grassroots engagement and diluted localisation efforts.

Fit for Purpose

UNHCR Somalia's operational structure and workforce have demonstrated adaptability in the face of shifting demands and growing constraints. The organisation has made substantial efforts to increase efficiency by nationalising its workforce, reducing international staff by 26% and increasing national recruitment by 23% between 2022 and 2024. This strategy helped lower costs and build local capacity, but it also led to critical gaps in expertise, especially in protection, durable solutions, and operational management. Efforts to align human resources with strategic priorities included the deployment of technical experts in disaster management and protection, as well as targeted training initiatives. However, the lack of a clear medium-term human resources policy and strategic workforce planning has hindered establishment of a fully fit-for-purpose workforce.

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[1] ABP is an approach that defines an area as the primary entry point, rather than a sector or target group. The HDP solutions are generally considered to be most valuable when linked to ABPs, and to also include the fourth nexus element; resilience to climate change. It is particularly appropriate in areas with complex, inter-related and multi-sectoral needs. ABP has been translated in Somalia as Area-Based Coordination, transforming a contextual analysis into a system of interaction among UN and NGOs present in an area

[2] The MYSP includes « Refugees, IDPs and returnees have improved access to alternative pathways and a range of durable solutions (Impact Area 4: Solve) »

Staff continue to juggle multiple roles, increasing pressure in complex contexts like Mogadishu and Kismayo.

The staffing challenges were compounded by persistent vacancies - 39.8% of planned positions remained unfilled in 2024 - and frequent staff rotations, especially at sub-national levels. These dynamics limited institutional memory, contextual understanding and reduced operational continuity, particularly in hard-to-reach areas where access was already constrained by security protocols and bureaucratic obstacles.

UNHCR's field presence has supported strong relationships with authorities and enabled leadership in Camp Coordination and Camp Management (CCCM), Protection, and Shelter clusters. However, the decentralised model is costly, and budget constraints have led to a growing imbalance: staffing lines are consuming an increasing proportion of the operational budget, while funds available for direct service delivery (operational costs budget line) have declined sharply. UNHCR Somalia shows a ratio of staff and administrative budget to operations costs (OPS) that is well above UNHCR standards (30% / 70%), indicating a lower availability of funds for operations. UNHCR's funding model remains heavily reliant on a single donor, the United States (73% of total funding for the period under review). Attempts to diversify funding and engage development actors showed some promise in 2024 but remain nascent. Likewise, the organisation's push toward localisation and sustainability has been undermined by inconsistent capacity-building and continued substitution of government roles, particularly in asylum system development.

Despite these challenges, UNHCR's decentralised engagement frameworks offer a potential pathway to a more sustainable, climate-aware, and locally grounded contribution. The wide-ranging field presence is a strength. Still, operational efficiency is impeded by overlapping planning frameworks, unclear accountability structures, and high coordination costs.

Synergies and Partnerships

UNHCR Somalia has made deliberate efforts to streamline its partnerships and align coordination mechanisms with evolving operational priorities. The reduction in non-governmental organisation (NGO) partners from 17 to 6 in 2024 aimed to minimise fragmentation, enhance accountability, and reduce administrative overheads.

The organisation's tri-cluster leadership role - in Protection, CCCM, and Shelter - remains a cornerstone of its collaborative engagement. However, unlike food, nutrition, water and sanitation, which are considered central to emergency responses and extensively funded in Somalia, UNHCR's investment in the IDP response remained comparatively more marginal. This has left the organisation with a lateral role in inter-agency coordination, further complicated by ambiguous national frameworks and competition over mandates.

UNHCR's implementing partnerships have increasingly taken on a transactional nature, as noted by implementing partners, many of whom regard UNHCR primarily as a funding agency. The organisation has successfully reached out to development banks, which allowed it to sign a significant funding agreement in 2023 with the African Development Bank (AfDB). Yet strategic engagement has remained constrained by rigid funding modalities (90% earmarking) and limited contingency planning. Recent efforts to prioritise national organisations, including government bodies, reflect UNHCR's localisation commitments under frameworks like the Grand Bargain. Nonetheless, the impact has been mixed. While some progress was made in maintaining national partner engagement despite shrinking budgets, challenges persist - including weak shared decision-making structures, and accountability gaps as also highlighted in audits.

Contributions to Envisioned Results

UNHCR's contribution to strategic objectives has been meaningful in protection and assistance, but progress has been hampered by serious weaknesses in planning, monitoring, and data systems. The Results Monitoring Surveys (RMSs) are the most consistent source of quantitative data but, alone, are insufficient to validate UNHCR's claims of performance. These deficiencies hinder the accurate measurement of programme effectiveness and present ongoing challenges to planning, evidence-based decision-making, and institutional accountability.

Despite these limitations and based on available verified evidence, the evaluation notes that UNHCR made several important contributions during the evaluation period (2020–2024). Key achievements included its support for the development of national legal and institutional frameworks—most prominently, the adoption of the Refugee Law—and efforts to enhance the technical capacity of Somalia's National Commission for Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons. UNHCR undertook systematic measures to strengthen the national asylum system, including capacity-building initiatives targeting the National Commission, the simplification of asylum procedures, the prioritisation of cases involving vulnerable individuals, and the revision of standard operating procedures. However, the asylum backlog remained largely unchanged, with 11,063 asylum seekers in Puntland still awaiting Refugee Status Determination (RSD) as of the end of October 2023.[3] The transfer of Refugee Status Determination (RSD) responsibilities to the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS) was hindered by lack of dedicated UNHCR staff, political instability, shortage of civil service personnel, procedural gaps in the RSD process, the absence of a dedicated public budget, and the regional fragmentation of asylum governance mechanisms.

On the humanitarian front, Cash-Based Interventions (CBI) and Core Relief Items (CRI) distributions have played a critical role in meeting basic needs and reducing economic vulnerability, particularly among high-risk profiles. Though these interventions received high beneficiary satisfaction scores, their scale remains insufficient in light of the immense needs, especially among IDPs, which speaks to the importance of enhancing engagement of non-transactional partners including where possible the private sector. UNHCR's and partners response to Gender-Based Violence (GBV), one of the highest budgeted outcomes of the operation has improved awareness and case referral mechanisms but does not appear to have significantly reduced the persistence of GBV-related risks.

In general, the provision of basic services such as health, and education has been dependent on funding from UNHCR (and other actors) which, combined with the difficulties in developing national systems and capacities, poses a challenge to sustainability. UNHCR's work to improve access to livelihoods, both through interventions and through its catalytic role since 2023, has helped to raise awareness about the economic inclusion of forcibly displaced persons in national policies and mobilise local actors. However, UNHCR's efforts to enhance self-reliance through livelihood interventions have been limited by an unfavourable macroeconomic situation, a predatory informal economy, misconceptions by some refugees who think that if they accept the cash grants for livelihood, they will not be considered for resettlement, or for other future cash assistance programmes. Other factors that have also negatively impacted support to self-reliance refer to an underdeveloped private sector and contextual barriers including access to land as a fundamental means of livelihood for many communities. Consequently, dependency on aid to meet basic needs remains a reality among FDP and their hosts.

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[3] Most recent data available to the evaluation team.

UNHCR's performance in cross-border coordination and protection also shows potential, particularly through established links with operations in Kenya, Ethiopia, Djibouti, and Yemen. These efforts enable better population tracking and data sharing, through a more strategic, better coordinated route-based approach is still needed.

CONCLUSIONS

UNHCR Somalia's operation from 2020 to 2024 demonstrated both commitment and local level adaptation amid an increasingly complex humanitarian landscape. The organisation has consistently upheld its protection mandate, delivering critical assistance in a context marked by insecurity, displacement, and recurrent climate shocks. Its broad field presence, cluster leadership roles, and sustained engagement with federal and sub-national authorities underline its unique positioning to bridge emergency response with longer-term benefits.

However, the evaluation reveals that despite these strengths, UNHCR's transformative impact has been limited by structural rigidity caused by an excessive focus on outputs rather than intervention logic, by resource constraints coupled with weak priority setting, and a lack of strategic management and systematic monitoring of outcomes. Relations with government agencies at all levels, a key strength, are hampered by the fragmentation of the state in Somalia. Urban-focused programming has reinforced dependency on aid and neglected rural and hard-to-reach communities. Coordination efforts, particularly through UN clusters, have required considerable time yet have not translated into effective synergies with development actors. The organisation has not been able build on certain assets, such as Protection First policies among UN agencies, or climate change policies through Area-Based Programming (ABP), to develop a transformative approach for these aspects.

The evaluation identified a critical tension between refugee protection and emergency assistance focused on local response on the one hand, and the pursuit of UN interagency coordination along with broad systemic efforts toward self-reliance for refugees and IDPs on the other. While life-saving interventions, such as protection services, shelter, and basic needs assistance remain central, efforts to scale up livelihoods and systems strengthening have been hindered by insufficient funding, technical gaps, and weak and labour-intensive partnerships.

At a deeper, more corporate level, UNHCR's planning and monitoring systems fall short of providing a basis for strategic clarity. The organisation has struggled to translate its strategic ambitions, as outlined in the MYSP, into actionable, measurable results frameworks and interventions. It has not been able to set clear organisational priorities and interpret meaningfully the very wide array of corporate policies (as opposed to a more passive broad alignment). This has led to the delivery of a wide range of fragmented outputs, especially outside Mogadishu, a large collection of guidance documents, and a lack of clarity in resource allocation across its four impact areas and in terms of staffing.

Internally, UNHCR's workforce model, which prioritised nationalisation and decentralisation, enhanced contextual relevance but reduced institutional memory and strained technical capacity. Persistent staff turnover and unclear medium-term human resource strategies undermined continuity and innovation.

In sum, UNHCR Somalia is at a crossroads. Its strengths in protection, its deep field knowledge, and its convening power position provided potential for a stronger catalyst role with a more locally led, and resilient response system. But to fulfil this role, the organisation must avoid pursuing too many directions defined predominantly at the level of outputs, sharpen its strategic focus, and invest in systems and partnerships that support long-term transformation alongside immediate humanitarian needs.

MAIN RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of growing financial uncertainty, the evaluation outlines pragmatic recommendations grounded in operational realities as of the end of 2024. These are designed to help UNHCR Somalia recalibrate its strategic posture, rebalance priorities, and strengthen resilience ahead of the next MYSP period.

Analytical Premise: Who to engage with and how to engage with them is the central question for the formulation of the new MYSP. It will define the type of system-wide role that UNHCR can play in Somalia. Enhancing programmatic relevance can be done through spatially defined planning and engagement without altering planned objectives, and whilst also supporting creation of a joint focus across outcomes.

> **Recommendation 1 (for the country operation (CO))**: **Strengthen Institutional Partnerships and Localisation** UNHCR should narrow and deepen the focus of the operation, enhancing national capacity by creating a unified area-based operational framework with the authorities.

> **Recommendation 2** (**for the CO**): **Strengthen the local level of agreements on ABP.** UNHCR should develop decentralised geographically defined agreements on ABP with sub-national governments while continuing its dialogue with federal-level partnerships on the same.

> **Recommendation 3** (**for the CO**): **Adopt a more transformative approach to partnership**. In line with the guidance on Sustainable Responses and the Global Compact on Refugees, UNHCR should pivot towards the convening and catalytic role that it now needs to play more systematically in achieving results.

Analytical Premise: UNHCR has scope to maintain a focus on life-saving support and protection promoting solutions through support to policy and legal work and by strengthening nexus working and use of ABP: UNHCR is able to promote self-reliance by leveraging investments from international financial institutions (IFIs) and by strengthening nexus-oriented approaches as bridging mechanisms that do not require direct implementation or additional resource inputs from UNHCR. Simultaneously, the organization should continue to support the development of a legal and policy framework that facilitates integration and inclusion. Within this strategic direction, opportunities emerge in programmatic areas such as micro-financing through cash-based interventions (CBIs) or specialized partners, land tenure protection, and support to local actors with significant implementation capacity. These approaches can be pursued without organizational adjustments (staffing and presence in Somalia) and align with a population-centric focus in the MYSP, which seeks to connect localised opportunities with the realistic scope of UNHCR's access to resources.

> **Recommendation 4 (for CO and field presences)**: UNHCR should focus on a delivery agenda including asylum capacity development, urgent protection needs and long-term inter-agency support on protection for both IDPs and refugees.

> **Recommendation 5 (for CO and field presences):** UNHCR should counteract urbanization pressures by enhancing rural service delivery to reduce displacement pull factors in accessible areas.

Analytical Premise: Enhancing Monitoring, Coordination, and Data Systems. Reducing the number of outputs to be achieved in the next MYSP (or alternatively the envisaged extension of the current MYSP) will aid a realistic fit to staffing of the CO. This should be accompanied by a reshaping of the monitoring system, with greater emphasis on the tracking of change beyond

output level (i.e. tracing effects on population groups), including an enhanced focus on quality of deliverables and use of lighter and more visual forms of reporting.

Recommendation 6 (for HQ, Regional Bureau, CO): UNHCR should strengthen monitoring frameworks for data consistency and accountability.

Recommendation 7 (for CO): UNHCR should establish a clear protection and area-based identification of hazards and capacities of local NGOs and local Government to operationalize the Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus.

Analytical Premise: Building Operational Resilience. Human resources will be a key theme in 2025 and after. Renewed attention to this aspect should help new staff better understand the operation and assimilate to institutional memory. Such measures would also help strengthen UNHCR's convening power in a context like Somalia where lack of staffing continuity negatively affects organizations.

Recommendation 8 (for HQ, Regional Bureau, CO): UNHCR should align staffing strategies with operational needs. UNHCR should emphasise onboarding, targeted recruitment, and strategic succession planning, and it should consider extending the current standard assignment length beyond two years.

Recommendation 9 (for HQ, Regional Bureau, CO): UNHCR should optimise its field presence and financial sustainability.

Analytical Premise: Addressing management challenges: Both the various OIOS audit reports and the evaluation findings have identified weaknesses in specific management areas of the operation that affect organisational and programme performance and require special attention.

Recommendation 10 (for Regional Bureau, and CO): UNHCR should draw up a plan to improve the overall management of the operation, programme performance and to accelerate the implementation of the OIOS auditors' recommendations.