



Executive Summary

Evaluation of the implementation of UNHCR's Southern Africa Regional Stepped-up Livelihood and Economic Inclusion Strategy 2021 – 2024

1 DECEMBER 2025

Conducted by:

TANGO International, Inc.

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 persons of concern.

Evaluation Office

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

Case Postale 2500

1211 Genève 2

Switzerland

unhcr.org/about-unhcr/who-we-are/evaluation-office

Published by UNHCR

Evaluation Office Copyright © 2025 UNHCR

This document is issued by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees for general distribution. All rights are reserved. Reproduction is authorized, except for commercial purposes, provided UNHCR is acknowledged.

Unless expressly stated otherwise, the findings, interpretations and conclusions expressed in this Evaluation Report are those of the Evaluation Team, and do not necessarily represent the views of UNHCR, the United Nations or its Member States. The depiction and use of boundaries, geographic names and related data shown on maps and included in lists, tables, and documents in this Evaluation Report are not warranted to be error free, nor do they necessarily imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of UNHCR or the United Nations concerning the legal status of any country, territory, city or area or of its authorities, or concerning the delimitation of its frontiers or boundaries.

Acknowledgements

The evaluation team gives sincere thanks to UNHCR staff, particularly RBSA and the Southern Africa country operations, for their support and inputs to this evaluation. Special thanks to Malene Molding Nielsen, Herzel Mukandi, Fabio Siani, and Jenny Beth Bistoyong as critical contributors to this evaluation for their valuable input and guidance. We are also grateful to the numerous refugee and host community groups including direct participants, representatives of partner and stakeholder organisations for their time and valuable inputs to the evaluation.

Commissioned by Regional Bureau for Southern Africa and Evaluation Office

Evaluation Quality Assurance provided by UNHCR Evaluation Office

Key evaluation information at a glance

Title of the evaluation	Evaluation of the implementation of UNHCR's Southern Africa Regional Stepped-up Livelihood and Economic Inclusion Strategy 2021 – 2024
Timeframe covered	2021 – 2024
Completion year	2025
Type of evaluation	Hybrid – Centralized/Decentralized evaluation ¹
Commissioned by	Former Regional Bureau for Southern Africa and Evaluation Office (1 st October, renamed to Regional Bureau for East and Southern Africa)
Locations/focus countries to be included	Angola, Democratic Republic of Congo, Malawi, Mozambique, Republic of Congo, Zambia, Zimbabwe, South Africa Multi-Country Office (Botswana, Eswatini, Namibia, South Africa)
UNHCR evaluation managers	Malene Nielsen , EDM – nielsenm@unhcr.org Herzel Mukandi , EDM – mukandi@unhcr.org Fabio Siani , RBSA – siani@unhcr.org
Names of the evaluation team	TANGO International evaluation team: Bruce Ravesloot, Team Leader & Evaluator Tanay Amirapu, Evaluation Coordinator & Evaluator Jo Zaremba, Evaluator Chloe Hein, Evaluator Mark Langworthy, Quantitative Expert Vanessa King, Research Support National focal points:² Zeferino Teka, Angola Evaluator Patience Mtembezeka, Malawi Evaluator Humphrey Fumpa, Zambia Evaluator

Abbreviations and acronyms

AAP	Accountability to Affected People
ABOD	Administrative Budget Obligation Document

¹ Designed as replacement for a single country strategy evaluation (CSE), this regional strategy evaluation, while commissioned by the RBSA (DE), is fully funded by the Evaluation Office (EvO). It has potential for broader learning globally and as such will be jointly managed and supported by RBSA and EvO.

² The SAMCO focal point was Bruce Ravesloot, Team Leader.

ADPP	Ajuda de Desenvolvimento de Povo para Povo / Development Aid from People to People
CARD	Churches Action in Relief and Development
CCCM	Camp Coordination and Camp Management
CO	Country Office
COMESA	Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa
CRRF	Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework
CSE	Country Strategy Evaluation
DHR	Division of Human Resources
DRC	Democratic Republic of Congo
DIPS	Division of International Protection and Solutions
DSPR	Division of Strategic Planning and Results
EDM	Executive Direction and Management
EE	External Engagement
ESA	East and Southern Africa
EQ	Evaluation Question
EU	European Union
EvO	Evaluation Office
EWADE	Eswatini Water and Agricultural Development Enterprise
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization
FDP	Forcibly Displaced People / Person
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
GRF	Global Refugee Forum
GSLAs	Group Savings and Loans Association
HCT	Humanitarian Country Team
HQ	Headquarters
IFAD	International Fund for Agricultural Development
IFPELAC	Alberto Cassimo Institute for Vocational Training and Labour Studies
INEP	National Institute for Employment Promotion
I/NGO	International / Non-Governmental Organization
INPP	National Institute of Professional Preparation
ILO	International Labour Organization
IT	Information Technologies
JAM	Joint Assessment Mission
KII	Key Informant Interview
LEI	Livelihoods and Economic Inclusion
LIS	Livelihoods Information System
LRR	Literature Review Report
MEL	Monitoring Evaluation and Learning
NFI	Non-Food Item
OECD-DAC	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Development Assistance Committee (DAC)
OIOS	United Nations Office of Internal Oversight Services
OL	Operating Level
OP	Operating Plan
OPS	Operations

PII	Personally Identifying Information
PSEA	Prevention of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse
QA	Quality Assurance
RB EHAGL	Operations in East and the Horn of Africa and Great Lakes
RBSA	Regional Bureau for Southern Africa
RCP	Regional Collaborative Platform
RLO	Refugee Led Organization
RMS	Results Monitoring System
ROC	Republic of Congo
RRRP	Regional Refugee Response Plan
RSD	Refugee Status Determination
SADC	Southern African Development Cooperation
SAMCO	South Africa Multi-Country Office
SDAE	Serviços Distritais de Actividades Económicas/District Services of Economic Activities
SPM	Strategic Planning and Management
STAFF	the salaries and entitlements of the regular UNHCR national and international positions
TANGO	Technical Assistance to Non-Governmental Organizations, TANGO International
TOC	Theory of Change
TOR	Terms of Reference
TVET	Technical and Vocational Education and Training
UN	United Nations
UNCT	United Nations Country Team
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNECB	UN System Chief Executives Board for Coordination
UNEG	United Nations Evaluation Group
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNSDCF	United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework
USD	United States Dollar
WCA	West and Central Africa
WFP	World Food Programme

Executive Summary

Overview. This report presents the evaluation of the implementation of UNHCR's Southern Africa Regional Stepped-up Livelihood and Economic Inclusion Strategy 2021–2024. The evaluation was commissioned by the UNHCR Regional Bureau for Southern Africa (RBSA) and the Evaluation Office. It examines the extent to which the Stepped-Up Strategy addressed the livelihoods and economic inclusion needs of forcibly displaced people and host communities across eleven operations: Angola, Botswana, Eswatini, Democratic Republic of Congo, Namibia, Malawi, Mozambique, Republic of Congo, South Africa, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. The evaluation was conducted by TANGO International, Inc.

This evaluation was conducted during a period of major organisational change for UNHCR. Initially it was planned to coincide with global, regional, and country-level strategic processes, including the drafting of the 2025–2030 Global Livelihoods and Economic Inclusion Strategy. However, the [2025 'humanitarian reset'](#) prompted an organisational realignment from UNHCR, with RBSA marked for closure and country operations reorganising, effective 01 October 2025.

Subsequently, the evaluation process was deliberately kept dynamic and responsive, while retaining its original focus on assessing relevance and coherence, effectiveness, efficiency, and partnerships underpinning the regional strategy. Conclusions and recommendations were formulated to directly support UNHCR's global organisational efforts to centralise, in addition to addressing the needs of both the regional and global livelihoods and economic inclusion portfolio. This includes UNHCR's renewed emphasis on self-reliance and sustainability, and its vision for country operations and regional bureaux to promote and pursue more system-oriented [sustainable responses approaches](#).

Evaluation purpose and objectives. The evaluation serves a dual purpose of accountability and learning. The objectives are to: (i) evaluate how the Stepped-Up Strategy has been operationalised and adapted in different contexts, (ii) provide recommendations on the conditions under which UNHCR can most effectively play a catalytic role in livelihoods and economic inclusion, and (iii) contribute to UNHCR's global evidence base on pathways to refugee self-reliance.

Subject of the evaluation. The Stepped-up Strategy was launched in 2021 to accelerate economic inclusion and access to livelihoods for forcibly displaced people and host communities to mitigate the economic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. It was informed by the [2018 Global Livelihood Strategy Evaluation](#) and the [2019–2023 Global Strategy Concept Note](#), and aligned with the RBSA Multi-Year Multi-Partner Protection and Solutions Strategy and RBSA Strategic Directions 2020-2022. In contrast to earlier approaches, the Stepped-Up Strategy emphasised systems-level facilitation and inclusion in government, development, and private-sector programmes, rather than UNHCR-led direct implementation. The evaluation covers all livelihoods activities implemented under the Stepped-Up Strategy during 2021–2024.

Methodology. The evaluation applies a non-experimental design deploying mixed-methods structured around OECD-DAC criteria and UNHCR evaluation standards. It draws on document and dataset reviews (strategic plans, programme data, financial datasets, evaluations, and audits), 243 in-person and remote qualitative consultations (103 UNHCR staff and partners; 140 refugees and host community members), and in-person fieldwork in Angola, Malawi, and Zambia. Country reviews of the 2021-2024 livelihood portfolio were developed to provide context-specific findings across all three evaluation questions. A structured rubric, aligned with the priorities and results of the Stepped-Up Strategy, was used to assess each country's progress. A specific focus was placed on recurring findings identified in previous evaluations and audits, which were explicitly integrated into the design to avoid redundant conclusions and enhance the usefulness of recommendations.

Summary Conclusions

Evaluation Question 1: How well did the Stepped-Up Strategy address refugee needs and align with national and regional policies? (Strategic relevance)

The Stepped-Up Strategy was conceptually strong and aligned with the key barriers facing refugees and host communities in Southern Africa, as well as with evolving national policy agendas. However, its practical influence was limited. While policy frameworks increasingly reference refugee inclusion, these commitments remained weakly embedded in financing and accountability systems, meaning implementation was still largely project-based and externally driven. Within UNHCR, the strategy was not widely socialised or operationalised, with country teams relying more on donor frameworks and national plans.

The evaluation highlights that strategic relevance depends not only on alignment with external needs but also on how well a strategy is carried forward institutionally. Without clear tools, consistent leadership buy-in, and integration into planning systems, strategies risk remaining aspirational. In the current context of centralisation, this has wider implications: unless future strategies are embedded within leadership structures and corporate systems of follow-through, they will remain marginal regardless of their conceptual strength.

Evaluation Question 2: To what extent did the strategy create pathways to resilience and economic inclusion, and how efficiently were resources used? (Effectiveness and efficiency)

Livelihoods interventions under the Stepped-Up Strategy demonstrated that projects can deliver clear short-term improvements in skills, productivity, and income for refugees and host communities. Yet, these gains were seldom sustained or scaled, as most initiatives remained fragmented, short-term, and weakly embedded in national systems. Effectiveness was, therefore, limited, with projectisation proving an essential entry point but rarely a pathway to systemic change. Projectisation will remain the principal mode of delivery for UNHCR's livelihood and economic inclusion work, and this carries both potential and limits for effectiveness. This evaluation shows that projects can demonstrate what is possible, but their strategic value lies in whether they are designed and positioned to connect into wider systems and collective responses at scale. The implication is that effectiveness in a projectised model should not be judged only by outputs at the project level, but by the extent to which those outputs contribute to medium- and longer-term pathways of resilience and inclusion and at scale.

The evaluation shows that efficiency was shaped less by programme design than by scale, delivery models, and timing. Larger operations with established partners and predictable cycles achieved lower costs, while smaller or remote operations struggled despite similar approaches. This underlines a key implication for UNHCR in the current reset: efficiency gains are unlikely to come from standardised models, but from partnerships, sequencing, and the alignment of projects with national systems. Weak data and monitoring systems further undermined UNHCR's ability to measure results or guide allocation. Under centralisation, effectiveness will depend not on expanding activities, but on whether projects are positioned within coherent systems that link costs, scale, and outcomes, and on whether evidence systems are strong enough to demonstrate value for money and inform adaptive choices. Projects that are integrated into national planning and supported by reliable monitoring can offer a credible contribution to resilience and inclusion, even where resources remain limited. By contrast, without these linkages, livelihoods risks being perceived as high-cost, low-impact workstreams, undermining their place within UNHCR's broader strategic portfolio.

Evaluation Question 3 How did UNHCR's strategic, catalytic, and operational roles influence partnerships for sustainable response? (Partnerships and catalytic role)

The Stepped-Up Strategy correctly recognised that partnerships and UNHCR’s catalytic role were essential to advancing livelihoods and economic inclusion. In practice these ambitions were not realised. Partnerships largely remained transactional and project-based, with few evolving into co-owned frameworks for financing, planning, or systemic investment. Regional leadership on livelihoods was limited, leaving country teams without consistent direction or platforms to connect local initiatives to broader policy and financing agendas.

The implication is that UNHCR retained credibility as a technical actor but did not consistently leverage its influence to convene stakeholders or broker durable systems change. Under the reset and centralisation, the challenge will be to ensure that livelihoods leadership functions (technical guidance, evidence generation, and partnership brokering) are clearly embedded within corporate structures. Without such institutionalisation, livelihoods risks remaining fragmented and donor-driven, rather than positioned as part of multi-stakeholder, system-level responses.

Lessons Learned

Lesson 1: Strategies that focus on vision without clear operational pathways lose traction in practice. The Stepped-Up Strategy broadly aligned with refugee needs and national level policies but was not embedded in UNHCR country office planning, guidance, or leadership systems, limiting its operational uptake.

Lesson 2: Results and evidence systems need consistent indicators, leadership demand, and dedicated capacity to be useful for decision-making. Gaps in baselines, static reporting, inconsistent methodologies, and the absence of specialised M&E roles meant monitoring was often treated as compliance rather than a management tool.

Lesson 3: Cost and workforce data systems must capture real resource use. Double-hatting of staff, unclear attribution of costs, and incomplete coverage of affiliates skewed efficiency estimates, highlighting the need for more realistic and integrated data systems to inform decisions.

Lesson 4: Livelihoods programmes need flexible project frameworks to withstand economic, climate, and donor shocks. Macroeconomic volatility, climate impacts, and donor re-prioritisation repeatedly disrupted progress, showing the limits of rigid project frameworks.

Lesson 5: Advocacy gains are most durable where UNHCR maintains sustained, direct engagement with decision-makers. Evidence showed stronger policy traction where UNHCR had ongoing government access, and weaker outcomes where engagement was ad hoc or delegated.

Lesson 6: Operations are most cost-efficient with a larger and more stable caseload, capable partners handling the majority of field-level delivery, and predictable funding and procurement cycles. Where these conditions were absent unit costs rose, even when sectoral focus and delivery models remained unchanged.

Lesson 7: Project-based delivery can demonstrate viable approaches (as models for possible scale) but rarely sustains or scales without integration into national systems. Short donor cycles and weak alignment with national systems or private sector meant pilots showed potential but rarely influenced structural change.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1. The 2025–2030 Global Economic Inclusion Strategy must function as a practical organizational framework that prioritizes usability by country operations.

The incoming global strategy should provide a concise Theory of Change with clear outcomes, pathways, and minimum operational requirements, rather than providing only a conceptual model with envisaged change that is largely hypothetical. The strategy document must quickly move the

user from high-level concepts to a clear understanding and firm direction on how UNHCR operations will link and contribute to the larger programme of work in-country. It must include shared definitions, agreed terminology, and a limited set of corporate indicators that link project outputs to system-level outcomes. The overreliance on conceptual change and lack of practicality was a critical weakness in the previous strategy. To avoid repeating past weaknesses, the strategy must not remain high-level or aspirational and must acknowledge that variation in contexts that UNHCR works, some of which have a disabling policy environment. The translation of policy into practice is important. The strategy should be accompanied by a costed strategy implementation plan that focusses on providing tailored support to country operations and includes practical tools that country offices and partners can use in planning, monitoring, and resource mobilisation.

Recommendation 2. Ensure all projects, regardless of size, are linked to national systems and UNHCR's strategic positioning.

Structure livelihood projects to engage directly with national systems, financing mechanisms, and collective responses; demonstrate short-term outputs can contribute to longer-term resilience and inclusion pathways. Interventions should be designed to demonstrate viable models, create policy space, and build partnerships that extend beyond project cycles. Position livelihoods within broader protection and solutions agendas by embedding them in multi-sector multi-partner responses. Monitoring and analysis should be expanded to include a project's contribution to system-level change. In the fundraising reality of reduced and tightly earmarked donor funding, UNHCR should build in earmarks for the convener role to ensure alignment to national systems is purposeful and resourced.

Recommendation 3. Phase out direct implementation, specifically small income generating activities, where these do not have strategic relevance.

Phase out fragmented, small-scale income-generating activities that deliver marginal results and are not linked to the broader theory of change or UNHCR's strategic positioning on livelihoods. Small scale income generating projects should only be initiated, if they meet specific criteria.

Recommendation 4. Invest in monitoring and evidence systems tailored to inclusion.

Establish a streamlined set of livelihoods indicators aligned with the new strategy, focused on inclusion and incorporating relevant metrics that address governance, financing, and ownership, not only on project outputs. The current framework indicators do not adequately capture important governance and ownership domains and instead focus on project level outputs. Develop practical systems to integrate partner and government data (e.g. joint reporting templates, data-sharing agreements), apply regular quality reviews at regional levels, and introduce outcome-tracking methods that extend beyond annual reporting. Embedding such systems will allow UNHCR to demonstrate value for money, inform resource allocation, and better understand how value chain and private sector landscapes inform the displacement context.

Recommendation 5. Clarify and resource livelihood and economic inclusion leadership, technical and implementation functions with clear accountability under the centralised model.

Designate where technical leadership, evidence generation, and partnership brokering for livelihoods will sit at the regional and HQ levels. Disseminate this structure to relevant focal points at the operational level. A defined unit or mechanism should be tasked with providing technical guidance and oversight to country operations, ensuring consistent use of the new strategy, and maintaining links to national and regional policy processes. This requires adequate staffing and authority to influence planning and resource mobilisation. Without such clarity, country operations will continue to operate in isolation, relying on donor frameworks rather than UNHCR's corporate direction.