

DURABLE SOLUTIONS

EVALUATION EVIDENCE FOR STRATEGIC DIRECTIONS 2027–2031



Durable Solutions

About this paper

This paper is part of the UNHCR Evaluation Synthesis Series — 12 papers drawing on 2,421 conclusions, good practices, and lessons learned from 122 independent evaluations commissioned by UNHCR between 2016 and 2026; this paper draws on 15 of those evaluations. To produce the series, an automated Python script extracted these findings verbatim from published evaluation reports, compiling them into a database. This structured foundation enabled the Evaluation Office to develop the papers through iterative dialogue using Claude Sonnet 5 (Anthropic). The Evaluation Office is responsible for all analytical judgments and final text.

Evidence on repatriation appears in the companion paper on Refugee Returnees, which examines the population's own experience of return. This paper looks instead at whether the durable solutions pillar can deliver the 50-by-35 vision at the scale the goal requires.

In brief. Durable solutions end a person's need for international protection, but the evaluations show each of the three tracks depends on conditions largely beyond UNHCR's control. Resettlement is constrained by the quotas and eligibility criteria states set at every stage, not by UNHCR's performance within them. Local integration can substantially reduce the size of a long-standing refugee population where a host state's will and refugees' own preference align, but the evidence shows this alignment is inconsistent rather than something advocacy alone can secure. Repatriation could resolve the need for international protection for more people than the other two tracks combined, but UNHCR does not track most returns, so whether return actually reduces reliance on aid is unknown for the majority of returnees. Naturalisation and resettlement together can reach only a fraction of the 8 million people 50 by 35 targets within the coming decade, leaving large-scale repatriation and self-reliance, which reduces reliance on aid without requiring a change in legal status, to carry the larger share.

1. Third-Country Solutions Are Constrained by State Decisions at Every Stage, Not by UNHCR's Performance

Resettlement ends the need for international protection, but the number of places available is set by the quotas and eligibility criteria resettlement states themselves decide, a dependency the evaluation record documents directly. The Protection Transfer Arrangement in Central America is fully reliant on the resettlement spaces and admissibility criteria that the United States, as the resettlement country, and Costa Rica, as the transit country, decide on their own.¹ The Zambia country strategy evaluation states the same dependency in general terms: solutions depend on the cooperation of third parties in a way that protection, which UNHCR drives directly, does not.²

Within whatever quota a state sets, the pace at which refugees actually move through it is shaped by both external and internal constraints, though the evaluation record finds the external ones the harder limit. The Emergency Transit Mechanism in Niger recorded average resettlement processing time rising from 38 days in 2017 to 722 days in 2024, well past an internal target of 180 days. UNHCR's own efforts to increase efficiency have not shortened this timeline, because the pace is set primarily by the availability of third-country quotas, shifting geopolitical dynamics, and the cooperation of host and resettlement states. The process, the evaluation concludes, remains fundamentally shaped by factors beyond UNHCR's control.³ The Emergency Transit Centres in Romania and the Slovak Republic show a related limit from an earlier decade. The evaluation calls the centres' name itself a

"contradiction in terms," since the word "emergency" assumes a rapid response that the actual, externally governed processing timelines do not deliver.⁴

*"Positioning resettlement as the primary durable solution led to unrealistic expectations among evacuees and refugees. The ETM's heavy emphasis on resettlement as the main durable solution led to unrealistic expectations among refugees and asylum seekers, many of whom associated their evacuation with eventual relocation to West."*⁵

Complementary pathways are often treated as a way to reach more refugees when resettlement quotas fall short, but they are constrained by the same dependency on state and third-party cooperation. They are not durable solutions in themselves but admissions, on educational, labour, or family grounds, that may eventually lead to one. In practice, most departures move through a single mechanism rather than a range of pathways. Of 114 total departures under the Niger project, 99 took place through the humanitarian corridor alone, while labour mobility and private or community sponsorship pathways were not used at all.³ The DAFI tertiary scholarship programme shows the same pattern in the education pathway specifically. Globally, around 50 per cent of DAFI graduates are not in employment, education, or training a year after graduating. That rate falls to between 20 and 30 per cent only in Rwanda and Uganda, where legislation is more favourable to the transition to work.⁵

2. Local Integration Depends on Host State Will and Refugee Preference

Local integration succeeds as a durable solution when three interrelated dimensions are pursued together. UNHCR's own foundational guidance identifies these dimensions as a secure legal status that can lead to citizenship, the ability to become economically self-reliant, and acceptance within the host society.^{6,7} Of the three, only the legal dimension ends a person's need for international protection. Whether these dimensions actually align depends on factors this paper's evidence base only partly captures: a host state's own political will, its demographic and economic circumstances, including whether refugees are perceived locally as net contributors or as competitors for jobs and land, and a refugee population's own attachment to its country of origin and assessment of conditions there. The Nepal country evaluation makes this point directly, finding that external conditions, not UNHCR's own advocacy, are the primary determinants of success.⁸ The evidence below includes countries where these variables aligned, and others where the state's will or refugees' own preference was absent.

*"External factors are primary factors in UNHCR's limitations and success.... Specifically, when the legal framework, political will and geopolitics align with UNHCR's objectives, there is greater opportunity for success" of local integration.*⁸

Guinea-Bissau shows what happens when the three dimensions are pursued together. The evaluation of UNHCR's Senegal multi-country strategy found that a simplified legal measure allowed the naturalisation of 4,984 Senegalese refugees who had fled the Casamance conflict, and that this naturalisation process ran alongside access to land, justice, and community development activities, with particular attention paid to women.⁹ The refugee population in Guinea-Bissau fell to 32 refugees and 37 asylum-seekers by 2024.⁹ Host-state commitment, the three dimensions moving together, and refugees' own acceptance of the solution offered were all present at once.

The same evaluation documents the opposite outcome in Senegal itself, a different country within the same regional strategy. Mauritanian refugees there, most displaced since a 1989

crisis, have rejected the naturalisation for which UNHCR had advocated on their behalf; they want to return to Mauritania with the rights and property they lost restored, not a new nationality.⁹ The dimensions and the legal offer were in place here too, unlike in the cases that follow. What partly determined the outcome was the refugees' own preference, not the design or delivery of the solution. Mauritania now considers the population Senegalese and has closed off return, leaving 11,536 people caught between the two positions as of 2024.⁹

A different variable determines the outcome in the remaining cases: whether a host state extends legal status to refugees at all, independent of what refugees themselves want. Where a state has legislated a status pathway specifically for refugees, the results are documented and durable. Mexico's regularisation process runs through to permanent residence and naturalisation with year-by-year statistics,¹⁰ and a global campaign to end statelessness produced tracked citizenship grants across several countries.¹¹ Where a state instead relies on administrative practice rather than legislation, the pathway is more fragile, even when it is refugee-specific. In Morocco, the mechanism that regularises recognised refugees was suspended for nearly two years and excludes LGBTI refugees entirely.¹² In Mauritania, a national registration drive counted over 140,000 foreign residents, demonstrating real administrative capacity to grant legal status in large numbers, but the drive was not refugee-specific, refugee children continued to be detained on immigration grounds, and the country's own asylum law remains in draft.¹³ The capacity to grant legal status, in other words, does not mean a state has chosen to extend it to refugees.

3. Repatriation Gets People Home, but Whether It Ends Aid Dependence Is Unknown

Voluntary repatriation should end the need for international protection and reliance on humanitarian aid, but for most returnees, no one knows whether it actually does. Most returnees arrange their own return, outside any formal repatriation exercise, and UNHCR does not track what happens to them afterward, whether they reintegrate and become self-reliant, are displaced again internally, remain economically dependent on the country they left, or are forced back across the border by renewed conflict. For most of this population, there is no evidence either way on whether return actually reduces reliance on aid.¹⁴

Reliance on humanitarian assistance can persist after a return because returnees lack the documents proving they are nationals of the country they returned to, and without that proof, they cannot legally claim land, enrol children in school, or take a job. Since issuing those documents is a state function, UNHCR's role is limited to supporting access, and the evaluation record shows this kind of support is rare. Iraq stands out as the exception. UNHCR's support for civil documentation there enabled livelihoods and inclusion in national systems, while also giving returnees freedom of movement and the security to return or settle elsewhere.¹⁵

"Many Burundians displaced in Tanzania who returned by their own means had likely remained 'invisible' to UNHCR... UNHCR and government sources lacked data and analysis on this population."¹⁴

As UNHCR does not routinely monitor refugees who return spontaneously, the evidence base on what happens to them after return is limited to a handful of documented cases. The 2022 evaluation on repatriation programmes found that some spontaneous returnees maintain a livelihood in their former host country rather than in their country of origin, moving back and

forth between the two to sustain themselves.¹⁴ Afghanistan is one of the few contexts where a further displacement after return is actually documented rather than simply unknown. There, sustainable solutions remain elusive for most IDPs and returnees alike, and returnees are often secondarily displaced by the same conflict dynamics that prevent durable local integration.¹⁶

For most returnees, UNHCR is unaware whether they gain self-reliance, which obviates the need for continued humanitarian assistance. We do know, however, that when development actors are present in the returnees' country of origin, self-reliance is more likely to follow. In Colombia, UNHCR positioned durable solutions centrally with the UN country team, co-led a solutions subgroup with UNDP, and extended the legalisation of informal settlements to returnees, producing sustainability gains the evaluation attributes to that combined approach.¹⁴ Conversely, UNHCR's area-based programme for return and reintegration in Afghanistan reached some 19 million people, but few committed development actors remained, particularly after the international exodus following 2021, and development funds remained unavailable years later.^{16,17} Colombia and Afghanistan were both area-based. Only Colombia convened development actors, and only Colombia's returnees saw the gains.

4. Conclusion

The new Strategic Directions frame durable solutions as central to reaching 50by35, but the evaluations show the pillar depends on factors largely outside UNHCR's control. Resettlement is capped by the quotas states set. Repatriation's contribution depends on whether conditions in the country of origin are safe enough to return to and whether returnees themselves choose to go. Local integration succeeds only where a host state's will and a refugee population's own preference align. Naturalisation and resettlement each move roughly the same modest number of people each year (some 75,000 apiece), together reaching only about a fifth of the 8 million people 50by35 targets within the coming decade. Reaching the rest depends on repatriation in far larger numbers, and on self-reliance, which reduces a refugee's need for aid without requiring any change in legal status at all.

Endnotes

Page numbers refer to the physical page position in the PDF version of each evaluation report and may differ from the printed page numbers shown in the document.

1. [Evaluation of effectiveness of the Protection Transfer Arrangement in Central America](#) (2018), p. 24.
2. [UNHCR Country Strategy Evaluation: Zambia](#) (2021), p. 12.
3. [Evaluation of the Emergency Transit Mechanism Project in Niger](#) (2025), pp. 34, 48, 46.
4. [Evaluation of Emergency Transit Centres in Romania and the Slovak Republic](#) (2016), p. 62.
5. [Tertiary Education Scholarship Programme \(DAFI\)](#) (2022), p. 72.
6. [1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol](#), Article 34.
7. [UNHCR Executive Committee, Conclusion No. 104 \(LVI\), Conclusion on Local Integration](#) (2005).
8. [Country Strategy Evaluation: Nepal](#) (2022), p. 67.
9. [Country Strategy Evaluation Senegal MCO](#) (2025), pp. 38, 41.
10. [Country Strategy Evaluation Mexico](#) (2022), pp. 10, 37, 40–41, 44.
11. [Evaluation of UNHCR-led Initiatives to End Statelessness](#) (2021), pp. 37, 38, 45.
12. [UNHCR Country Portfolio Evaluation: Morocco](#) (2019), pp. 21, 23–24.
13. [Country Strategy Evaluation Mauritania](#) (2023), pp. 29, 54.
14. [Repatriation Programmes and Activities](#) (2022), pp. 86, 88, 69, 68, 52.
15. [UNHCR Country Portfolio Evaluation: Iraq](#) (2020), pp. 50, 51.
16. [Evaluation of UNHCR's Country Operation, Afghanistan](#) (2020), p. 38.
17. [Evaluation of UNHCR's Response to the L3 Emergency in Afghanistan](#) (2023), pp. 18, 52, 13, 14.