

INTERNALLY DISPLACED PERSONS

EVALUATION EVIDENCE FOR STRATEGIC
DIRECTIONS 2027–2031



Internally Displaced Persons

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 18 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 4.6 (Anthropic). The Evaluation Office is responsible for all analytical judgments and final text.

This paper examines UNHCR's engagement with internally displaced people and the coordination role behind its comparative advantage there. Part of this evidence also appears in the paper on UNHCR as Coordinator and Convener, which examines that role across populations and displacement contexts.

In brief. UNHCR's distinctive value in situations of internal displacement lies in protection leadership exercised through inter-agency coordination, which no other actor can match. That value is put at risk because UNHCR rarely coordinates without also delivering protection and assistance. The two roles compete for the same staff and resources, and its operational role undermines the neutrality a cluster lead requires. Without an agreed boundary, this combined role expands through drift rather than a decision about where UNHCR adds most value. Nor is there a defined point at which it ends. Transition to national ownership is a genuine commitment, and UNHCR supports governments well in building policy, but it does not plan the handover or build the capacity the government would need to deliver, so UNHCR's involvement deepens with no exit strategy in place. The evidence points to a defined role, anchored in protection leadership and bounded by comparative advantage. That is where UNHCR's contribution is strongest.

1. UNHCR's Comparative Advantage Is Protection Leadership Through Coordination

UNHCR does not hold a general mandate for internally displaced persons (IDPs); national authorities bear primary responsibility for their displaced citizens, and every finding in this paper should be read against that baseline. Where UNHCR engages, the evaluation record locates its distinctive value in protection leadership exercised through inter-agency coordination, drawing on field presence, legal and policy expertise, convening authority, and sustained government relationships that no other actor combines at the same scale.¹

In northern Ethiopia, UNHCR's L3 response made a crucial contribution to the inter-agency effort, promoting the centrality of protection with the Humanitarian Coordinator and delivering protection services to more than 2.5 million IDPs.² In Afghanistan, UNHCR provided protection leadership that strengthened the inter-agency response throughout the crisis.³ In Mozambique, leadership of the Protection Cluster and its associated working groups enabled the advocacy, planning, and programming that expanded protection for displaced populations.⁴ In the Philippines, UNHCR led protection coordination within the Mindanao Humanitarian Team, driving implementation of the HCT's protection strategy.⁵ Beyond country operations, UNHCR led inter-agency coordination on gender-based violence across 45 refugee, IDP, and mixed settings, partnering with more than 200 organisations.⁶

The contribution is sharpest in protection analysis that no other actor generates. In Darfur, the protection cluster published advocacy briefs setting out conflict trends, displacement patterns, and specific rights violations that informants across the UN system cited as distinctive.⁷ In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, protection monitors trained from within the displaced and

host communities produced detailed reporting on population movements, ethnic targeting, and violations that the evaluation found no other actor was generating, and that continued even when humanitarian access was cut.⁸ Where UNHCR invests in protection expertise and community-level presence, the coordination role delivers what the humanitarian system cannot otherwise obtain.

*"The comparative advantage of UNHCR is clearly in protection – an advantage enhanced by its field presence, its engagement at the community level through to global levels, its network of partners, its expertise in law and policy, its authority and convening power and protection lead, and its sustained engagement over the years with governments."*¹

2. Operational Delivery Pulls Resources Away From the Coordination Role UNHCR Does Best

The protection leadership described above is a coordination role: UNHCR convenes the actors in its sector, leads protection analysis, and coordinates the collective response on behalf of the wider system. In most IDP operations UNHCR is also an operational actor, delivering assistance directly or through partners. The evaluation record shows these two roles pulling against each other and identifies the line between them as a question the organisation has not resolved.⁹

The West and Central Africa shelter and settlement evaluation concluded that the boundaries between UNHCR's role as an operational agency and its role as cluster lead require clarification in both IDP-only and mixed settings.⁹ In Iraq, UNHCR led three clusters through which assistance was delivered to IDPs; co-leadership of the Protection Cluster alone took up most of the operation's time, expertise, and resources.¹⁰ In Somalia, the administrative machinery of operational partnership management, including agreements, oversight, and contracting, drew staff time and resources into bureaucratic and reactive tasks rather than the proactive partner engagement that coordination requires.¹¹

The cost is not only in resources but in standing. A cluster lead is expected to coordinate its sector impartially, and the dual role complicates that expectation. An early evaluation of UNHCR's cluster leadership found that confusion over its responsibilities as cluster lead agency could compromise the neutrality of the cluster, and that this understanding was inconsistent across the organisation.¹² The shelter and settlement evaluation found the same dual role producing confusion among partners over what fell under coordination and what under operations, which limited the effectiveness of both.⁹ The evaluation record documents these costs but does not examine a related question: when UNHCR coordinates a cluster whose members include the partners it funds, whether those partners can raise concerns and contest priorities on equal terms with the agency that finances them.

Across these operations the lesson is consistent: where UNHCR carries both roles, operational delivery draws the staff, time, and resources that coordination needs, and the neutrality on which the coordination role depends is harder to sustain. The comparative advantage UNHCR holds in coordination is the one that suffers.

*"There remains a high level of confusion in relation to UNHCR's cluster lead agency responsibilities which can compromise the neutrality of the cluster."*¹²

3. IDP Engagement Expands Through Drift Rather Than Decision

In Sudan, UNHCR's portfolio expanded as fresh waves of displacement arrived and as headquarters policy pushed for a broader role, rather than from a decision about where the organisation's contribution was distinctive; the evaluation found that insufficient strategic prioritisation had left the operation overloaded.⁷ The 2019 IDP policy set intentions, not operational boundaries: the IDP engagement evaluation found offices committed to the policy but unable to apply it in practice, and called for clarity on what UNHCR should and should not take on.¹

Without an agreed boundary, the scope and form of UNHCR's engagement is decided ad hoc, context by context. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, stakeholders including UNHCR's own staff and donors lacked a common understanding of the organisation's comparative value during the IDP response.¹³ In Mozambique, engaging in one cyclone response but not another exposed what the evaluation called a long-standing and unresolved debate over whether UNHCR should respond to displacement caused by disasters rather than conflict.¹⁴ In Brazil, the response to climate-related flooding raised the same unsettled question about UNHCR's role in displacement driven by extreme weather.¹⁵ In Honduras, opening an operation in a context of generalised violence by non-state armed actors tested how far UNHCR's mandate stretches into displacement that fits no conventional category.¹⁶

The evaluations point consistently in the same direction: the boundary should be drawn around UNHCR's comparative advantage. A division of labour guided by a shared understanding of what UNHCR does best, and of what its partners do best, is what the South Sudan evaluation identified as the key to meeting protection needs as resources tighten.¹⁷ The boundary the evidence calls for is not a smaller role but a defined one, drawn around the protection leadership that is UNHCR's distinctive contribution.

"Better strategic prioritisation and use of comparative advantage is key to leveraging improved impact."

4. Transition to National Ownership Is a Stated Commitment Without an Operational Plan

Supporting governments to take ownership of the response to IDPs is a consistent commitment in UNHCR's engagement, and the evaluation record credits its work helping them build policy and strategy. In Sudan, UNHCR supported the transitional government to build the foundations of a protection policy agenda for IDPs and refugees, work the evaluation found UNHCR uniquely positioned to do.⁷ In South Sudan, UNHCR helped develop a national durable solutions strategy and joint government partnership structures to carry the strategy forward.¹⁷

Building the policy is not the same as building the capacity to deliver it. The South Sudan evaluation found that UNHCR's support kept the government functional but did not build its institutional capacity for the longer term or plan how responsibilities would transfer to national authorities.¹⁷ Where handover did occur, it was unplanned: transferring protection responsibility for displacement sites to the government yielded lessons about the safeguards such transfers require, lessons drawn only after the fact.¹⁷ In Mozambique, the evaluation found expanded protection presence but no clearly defined exit strategy.⁴ In Ukraine, two years into the response, the humanitarian system had still not articulated a transition plan to place coordination under national leadership.¹⁸ The evaluations examine whether transition plans

and capacity-building exist; they do not assess the quality of national co-leadership itself, where governments named as cluster co-leads may be genuine leaders or nominal partners.

The result is engagement that deepens without a route out. UNHCR builds government capacity case by case, hands over when it must, and codifies the lessons afterward rather than planning the transition from the start. The commitment to national ownership is genuine; what the evidence finds missing is the operational framework that would turn it from intention into transfer.

"Current UNHCR institutional support to government is based on helping it to be functional, without a longer-term framework to build government institutional capacity, or a long-term plan to hand over responsibilities to government."¹⁷

5. Conclusion

In situations of internal displacement, UNHCR holds one advantage no other actor can match. It is protection leadership exercised through coordination. Because the line between this role and operational delivery is undefined, three problems recur. Leading the protection cluster while delivering protection and assistance forces the same overstretched staff to carry both and erodes the impartiality the cluster role demands. Engagement expands ad hoc as new displacement arrives, rather than by decision about where UNHCR adds most value. With no plan for handover, it then deepens over time rather than drawing down as the emergency recedes.

What the evidence supports is therefore not a larger role or a smaller one, but a bounded one, anchored in the protection leadership that distinguishes UNHCR, held apart from operational delivery, and scoped by deliberate decision. That leadership is most valuable when it supports national authorities through the emergency phase and steps back as their capacity allows, rather than deepening UNHCR's own engagement without end.

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 UNHCR's Engagement in Situations of Internal Displacement](#) (2024), pp. 11, 12.
2. [Evaluation of UNHCR's Response to the L3 Ethiopia](#) (2023), p. 54.
3. [Evaluation of UNHCR's Response to the L3 Emergency in Afghanistan](#) (2023), p. 54.
4. [Country Strategy Evaluation Mozambique](#) (2023), p. 16.
5. [Evaluation of the Protection and Solutions Programme for Internally Displaced Persons in Mindanao](#) (2025), p. 53.
6. [Evaluation of UNHCR Approach to Gender-Based Violence Prevention, Risk Mitigation and Response](#) (2025), p. 50.
7. [Country Strategy Evaluation: Sudan](#) (2022), pp. 29, 60, 61.
8. [UNHCR's Response to the 2019/20 Level 3 IDP Emergency in the Democratic Republic of Congo](#) (2022), p. 13.
9. [West and Central Africa Regional Shelter and Settlement Evaluation](#) (2022), pp. 11, 84.
10. [UNHCR Country Portfolio Evaluation: Iraq](#) (2020), p. 51.
11. [Country Strategy Evaluation Somalia](#) (2025), p. 71.
12. [Evaluation of UNHCR's Leadership of the Global Protection Cluster and Field Protection Clusters](#) (2017), p. 67.
13. [Independent Evaluation of UNHCR's Response to the L3 Emergency in the Democratic Republic of Congo](#) (2018), p. 46.
14. [Evaluation of UNHCR's Level-3 Emergency Response to Cyclone Idai](#) (2021), p. 53.
15. [Country Strategy Evaluation Brazil](#) (2025), p. 82.
16. [Country Strategy Evaluation Honduras](#) (2023), p. 15.
17. [Country Strategy Evaluation South Sudan](#) (2023), pp. 95, 96, 99.
18. [Evaluation of UNHCR's L3 Response in Ukraine](#) (2024), p. 79.