

REFUGEE RETURNEES

EVALUATION EVIDENCE FOR STRATEGIC
DIRECTIONS 2027–2031



Refugee Returnees

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 9 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 Opus 4.8 (Anthropic). The Evaluation Office is responsible for all analytical judgments and final text.

In brief. UNHCR assesses voluntariness as a binary choice when in fact returnees face a range of imperfect options, and the majority of returnees go home outside any formal repatriation exercise or support. Returnees arrive as nationals of the state receiving them, often, however, without the documents that prove it. That documentation is what gives a returnee access to land, to a school, to work and to freedom of movement. Documents are one condition of a viable and sustainable return. Work is another factor, and some returnees who find none at home cross back again into the country of asylum to earn a living. Returns prove more durable where UNHCR takes an area-based approach and brings in development actors from the outset. Yet UNHCR has not routinely assessed conditions in areas of return before people go home, nor has it monitored what becomes of those people once they are home.

1. Returnees Have a Right to Voluntariness That Is Not Always Verified

Returnees decide whether to go home under conditions UNHCR's guidance does not fully capture.¹ The 2022 repatriation evaluation found voluntariness significantly more difficult to operationalise than that guidance reflects, because it is assessed as a binary choice when in fact returnees face a scale of imperfect options in an environment of constrained choice.¹

"There is an inherent tension between UNHCR's role in repatriation as part of a political process of transition and its protection objective of ensuring that refugee returns are voluntary, safe and dignified."¹

Most returnees go home outside any formal repatriation exercise, and the same evaluation found this group the largest share of returnees globally. Facilitated returns are well executed for the returnees they reach, but such support only reaches a minority of returnees.¹ The CRRF two-year progress assessment identifies the same gap from the country-of-origin side: conditions and relative safety for return require fuller assessment before returns can be tracked against protection standards, because refugees may leave a country of asylum where protection has deteriorated rather than because conditions at home have improved.² Without that assessment there is no baseline against which a returnee's safety after arrival could be monitored.

Furthermore, voluntariness carries a different meaning for those who have never lived in the country they are returning to. Second and third-generation Afghan refugees in Iran know little about Afghanistan, and some return for the sole purpose of obtaining a passport and a student visa that lets them study in Iran.¹

The repatriation evaluation examines what self-organised returnees receive; it does not examine how they reach the decision to return, or what they know about their country of origin

when they make it. This is an evidence gap, not a negative finding: the choice made by most returnees has not been subject to systematic scrutiny.

2. Returnees Carry a Claim to Nationality They Often Cannot Prove

Returnees go home as nationals and often arrive without the papers that prove it. Civil documentation is what a returnee uses to reclaim land, enrol a child in school, take a job or move freely, and issuing it is the responsibility of the state. The repatriation evaluation puts the limit plainly: communities offer real potential for reintegration, but they are no substitute for state structures in the delivery of civil documentation, legal safety and the rule of law.¹

Refugees preparing to go home often have no way to reach the authorities who would issue their papers. The Mali country strategy evaluation found that refugees in protracted displacement named the absence of a link with authorities in their country of origin as a primary concern, one that constrains the possibility of return in better conditions.³ By contrast, returnees to the Central African Republic were registered before departure and issued Voluntary Return Forms by their own authorities. Because UNHCR knew who they were, it could monitor them for protection risk after arrival and support them in recovering their rights as citizens.¹ Returnees who organise their own return meet no such reception, and receive significantly less reintegration support once home.¹ Colombia is the exception the evaluation names: returnees arrive without assistance and are supported afterwards through area-based interventions in the communities they return to, an approach the evaluation found works well.¹

"In CAR there is some evidence that facilitated returns give returnees better access to protection in the long term, including in the area of housing, land and property."¹

The Iraq country portfolio evaluation found progress towards the inclusion of internally displaced persons and returnees in national systems limited, constrained by political instability and by the federal government's absence from joint planning. The one exception it named was UNHCR's civil documentation programme, which the evaluation found facilitates livelihoods and inclusion in national systems and gives people the freedom of movement and the security to return to their areas of origin or settle elsewhere.⁵ Documentation is a service the state provides, and every other service a returnee needs depends on it.

Documentation also makes return itself more likely. The evaluation of UNHCR's engagement in humanitarian-development cooperation found, through quantitative impact analysis, that families with at least one child whose birth was registered were around 7.5 per cent more likely to return to their country of origin, and that possessing a birth certificate raised children's enrolment in school.⁸

Returning children face the sharpest exposure. A child born in exile has a claim to the parents' nationality but often no way to prove it; the country of origin recognises the claim only against documents a displaced family may not hold. The statelessness evaluation finds that displacement itself can produce statelessness, through loss of identity documentation and in some cases arbitrary deprivation of nationality, and that obtaining documents such as birth certificates is a critical step in proving citizenship.⁴ A lack of birth registration or documentation leaves people unable to prove a nationality they hold, and the evaluation notes the risk can compound across generations.⁴ It calls on states to safeguard nationality for children born to refugees in countries of asylum who would otherwise be stateless; however, very few have adopted the provision.⁴

3. Returnees Who Self-Repatriate Are the Least Supported and Least Known

Returnees who organise their own return outnumber facilitated returns by 350% in some countries, yet receive the least support.¹ What they return to is often an economy that cannot absorb them. The Iraq country portfolio evaluation found the economic inclusion of returning populations hampered by macroeconomic conditions, with slow growth and the prospect of recession limiting jobs and livelihoods in areas of return.⁵ Some returnees maintain a livelihood across the border. The repatriation evaluation reported that a significant number of returnees to the Central African Republic travel to the Republic of the Congo, their former country of asylum, to sustain their livelihoods, and that refugees from the Democratic Republic of the Congo move back and forth between the two countries in the same way.¹

*"The disparity between the prevalence of self-organised returns and the scale of protection resources allocated to them is perhaps the most notable sign of a lack of coherence in UNHCR repatriation practice."*¹

The Afghanistan country operation evaluation found that returnees often become secondarily displaced.⁶ The South Sudan strategy evaluation raises a related concern: weak monitoring means it is unclear how sustained spontaneous returns actually are.⁹ A return recorded as complete may therefore be the start of a further displacement, and UNHCR does not consistently know the extent of this phenomenon.

Returnees who go home by their own means are equally unknown to UNHCR. In Burundi, many who returned from Tanzania had never sought refugee status there and remained invisible to UNHCR, which held no data or analysis on them and little information on their protection needs or their progress towards a durable solution.¹ The evaluation recommends that UNHCR explore reintegration support that accommodates the mobility many returnees retain after return, and that it link intention surveys in countries of asylum with monitoring in countries of origin.¹ It further recommends that the information given to prospective returnees be timelier and more localised, and that UNHCR build the capacity in countries of origin to collect it, covering conditions in areas of return, access to public services and the inclusion of returnees in national systems.¹

4. Returnees Reintegrate Where UNHCR Takes an Area-Based Approach and Convenes Development Actors

A returnee's first months at home are financed by a repatriation package, and in Burundi that package ran out. Food, non-food items and cash of 150 dollars per adult and 75 per child, designed to last three months, often lasted no more than one. The cash is among the lowest such payments in the world, and the evaluation found it insufficient against the scale of reintegration needs.¹

A returnee's prospects once the repatriation package is spent depend on where they returned to rather than on what they need. The repatriation evaluation found that reintegration support draws on no set operating model and rests on limited guidance, so what reaches a returnee depends on the resources and initiative of the individual operation.¹ In Afghanistan, the evaluation judged self-reliance an unrealistic goal for reintegration, given the extreme poverty of the country returnees were coming home to.⁶

"In the area of reintegration, impact-level results have been elusive, due in part to the broad timespan needed for these results to materialise."¹

Returnees do better where UNHCR takes an area-based approach and supports them regardless of status. The evaluation found broad consensus that programmes serving returned refugees, IDPs and host communities together have produced positive results, and that a narrower approach serving returnees by status alone limits what any of them gain.¹ In Colombia, UNHCR adapted long-standing programmes so that the legalisation of informal settlements reached returnees as well as the internally displaced, and the evaluation found indications of sustainability gains achieved through economies of scale across both groups.¹

Afghanistan shows the same logic at a much larger scale, and its limits. UNHCR's area-based programme for return and reintegration expanded from 40 to 55 areas during the 2021–2022 emergency, reaching some 19 million people, including 6 million displaced and 13 million in host communities.¹⁰ The Afghanistan country operation evaluation found that UNHCR's planning process for the programme did not sufficiently engage other key actors, which compromised its ability to mobilise them, and the L3 evaluation found this unresolved years later: UNHCR struggled to find committed development actors, with development funds still unavailable, leaving it with few opportunities for responsible disengagement.^{6,10}

Returnees gain development support where UNHCR convenes the actors who provide it. In Colombia, UNHCR positioned durable solutions centrally with the UN country team, established a durable solutions subgroup co-led with UNDP, and worked with the ILO on access to employment for returnees.¹ It also co-chairs the national interagency platform on mixed movements, bringing together the response to returnees, refugees, migrants and host populations across 14 departments. The evaluation found the coordination mechanism worked because UNHCR created a convening space rather than imposing a top-down approach.¹

The evaluation recommends that UNHCR scale up protection monitoring in areas of return and establish hubs that returnees can approach for advice and legal assistance, including those who went home by their own means.¹ It further recommends that budgets and funding instruments support reintegration spanning returned refugees, returned IDPs and local communities together, and that reintegration be presented to donors as needs-based rather than status-based.¹ UNHCR accepted both but reports that scaling up protection monitoring remains conditional on resources being available.⁷

5. Conclusion

The new Strategic Directions envisage a bounded role for UNHCR with returnees: support the voluntary return, support initial reintegration, monitor the border, and work thereafter through advocacy and convening rather than delivery. The repatriation evaluation recommends the same division of labour, concluding that the onus for reintegration outcomes lies with development actors and that UNHCR should use its resources and convening power to greater effect rather than delivering reintegration itself.

Using that convening power to greater effect begins with protection monitoring in areas of return, without which UNHCR has no evidence for its advocacy or convening roles. Built on that evidence, an area-based approach produces more durable results than one organised by status, and convening development actors from the outset of a response is what makes that

approach work. Absent both, UNHCR remains committed to a role indefinitely, without the partners needed to complete it.

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. [Repatriation Programmes and Activities](#) (2022), pp. 8, 59, 87, 88, 89, 77, 64, 69, 70, 67, 41, 68, 52, 72, 84, 96, 97, 9, 92.
2. [Two Year Progress Assessment of the CRRF Approach](#) (2018), p. 67.
3. [Évaluation de la stratégie de pays Mali](#) (2024), p. 70.
4. [Evaluation of UNHCR-led Initiatives to End Statelessness](#) (2021), pp. 21, 38.
5. [UNHCR Country Portfolio Evaluation: Iraq](#) (2020), pp. 50–51.
6. [Evaluation of UNHCR's Country Operation. Afghanistan](#) (2020), pp. 45, 46.
7. [Management Response to the Evaluation of UNHCR's Repatriation Programmes and Activities 2015–2021, Year 2 Follow-Up Report](#) (2022).
8. [Evaluation of UNHCR's Engagement in Humanitarian-Development Cooperation](#) (2021), pp. 7, 70, 85.
9. [Country Strategy Evaluation South Sudan](#) (2023), p. 64.
10. [Evaluation of UNHCR's Response to the L3 Emergency in Afghanistan](#) (2023), pp. 13, 14.