

REFUGEES AND ASYLUM SEEKERS

EVALUATION EVIDENCE FOR STRATEGIC
DIRECTIONS 2027–2031



Refugees and Asylum-Seekers

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 30 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 refugees and asylum-seekers across the displacement cycle, from the legal prerequisites of protection through self-reliance to durable solutions. Part of this evidence also appears in the paper on UNHCR as Operational Actor, which takes a systems-level lens.

In brief. Refugee protection is the legal obligation of host states. The rights states extend to refugees determine whether self-reliance and durable solutions are within reach. In the emergency phase, when state capacity is overwhelmed and UNHCR has planned its support well in advance, the evaluations show it delivers protection, registration, and life-sustaining assistance effectively. What the evaluations show with equal consistency is that the emergency delivery model does not reliably give way to national ownership. Emergency structures persist, exit planning is absent, and refugees remain on parallel UNHCR assistance rather than being included in the national systems through which self-reliance becomes possible. Where self-reliance has been achieved, the evaluations attribute it to states opening legal and economic space and to development actors and international financial institutions providing what UNHCR cannot — financing and employment. Instead, UNHCR's role is to advocate, convene, and mobilise those actors rather than substitute for them. Durable solutions follow the same logic: returns, resettlement, and local integration succeed where UNHCR supports the responsible actors from the outset and stall where that support comes late. The 50by35 goal is attainable where these conditions are met.

1. Self-Reliance and Solutions Begin with the Rights States Extend to Refugees

Access to territory, asylum, and the attendant rights of legal status are the prerequisites on which self-reliance and durable solutions depend. The evaluative evidence over the past decade shows that UNHCR support is effective where host states meet those obligations and limited where they do not. In Egypt, UNHCR worked to secure a fair protection environment for refugees and asylum-seekers within a complex protection space, building the partnerships and formal mechanisms needed to intervene effectively when individual rights were breached.¹ In Morocco, sustained UNHCR engagement built capacity across senior and technical officials from multiple state institutions, establishing the building blocks of a national asylum system.² In the United Kingdom, UNHCR's quality-assurance role in the national asylum procedure gave practical effect to its supervisory authority under the Refugee Convention.³

The evaluations are equally consistent on what happens when states do not meet those obligations. UNHCR documents violations and advocates for change, but where states limit access to territory, asylum, or registration, the immediate and longer-term impact on refugees is measurable. The joint evaluation of refugee protection during the COVID-19 pandemic found that measures adopted in many countries were inconsistent with international law.⁴ This record includes evidence of collective expulsion and violations of the principle of non-refoulement, including by states party to the Convention.⁴ In Angola, urban refugees' access

to services and protection deteriorated as new national legislation stalled in implementation, leaving those without formal status unable to access the rights it was designed to provide.⁵ Further, in Bangladesh, refugees avoided a registration process for fear of forced repatriation, so documentation secured in principle did not confer protection in practice.⁶ When core refugee rights are withheld, the path to self-reliance and durable solutions narrows significantly.

Conversely, the evidence shows increased refugee self-reliance when governments institutionalise the legal and policy frameworks for asylum. In Brazil, UNHCR engagement with the national asylum authority was essential to developing good protection practices and fair, efficient asylum decisions.⁷ Across IGAD member states, governments passed comprehensive legislation supporting refugee access to education and included refugees systematically in national education sector plans, establishing the legal and policy environment on which sustainable inclusion depends.⁸ The evidence is consistent that where states extend and institutionalise those rights, UNHCR support produces results that outlast its direct engagement.

"Full achievement of refugee inclusion requires implementation of the right to work, the right to freedom of movement and the right to documentation."⁸

2. UNHCR Delivers Effectively at the Onset of Displacement but Must Plan Its Support to End

The evaluation record is consistent that UNHCR performs effectively during the emergency phase, delivering protection, registration, and life-sustaining assistance at scale in support of host states. In Afghanistan, UNHCR had planned well before the L3 activation (scenario planning, contingency partnership agreements, and pre-positioned supplies), enabling a response the evaluation assesses as a model of good practice.⁹ In Sudan, established presence across four countries, whole-of-organisation emergency protocols, and field-level decision-making authority enabled UNHCR to establish credible leadership with more than 80 partners in a compressed timeframe.¹⁰ In Ukraine, UNHCR organised a \$1.8 billion response plan with more than 140 partners across five countries within weeks of the crisis onset, mobilising private sector contributions at an unprecedented scale.¹¹ In each case, what made the response possible was what had been planned well before the emergency was declared.

Building on that preparedness, the record also shows that UNHCR consistently delivered life-saving assistance effectively across the sectors. In Bangladesh, shelter, water, sanitation, and camp infrastructure were rapidly scaled for the Rohingya influx; disease risks in overcrowded conditions were contained and mortality did not rise.⁶ In Afghanistan, UNHCR reached nearly one million people with emergency cash support and core relief items for 680,000 people within months of the L3 activation.⁹ Across four countries hosting Sudanese refugees, UNHCR steered a large-scale regional response, delivering registration, legal assistance, shelter, and basic needs through 80 operational partners in one of the most challenging operating environments of the decade.¹⁰ In Ukraine, cash became the most effective pillar of the response, with UNHCR adjusting the scale and breadth of its delivery to each host government's capacity and willingness to engage.¹¹

"The breadth of its emergency response — including registration, legal assistance, basic needs assistance and shelter — was relevant for providing basic-service and life-saving support in coordination with other operational partners."¹⁰

Of all the sectors, registration carries particular weight. The evaluation record identifies registration as UNHCR's most operationally reliable protection tool. Whether conducted alone, jointly with the host government, or in support of it, the evidence shows that UNHCR registers refugees effectively and at scale from the start of every emergency response. In Uganda, registration enabled unhindered, non-discriminatory access to territory, protection services, and essential services.¹² Across the Sudan response, it was identified alongside legal assistance and basic needs as central to what made the emergency response life-saving.¹⁰ UNHCR's operational role in emergencies is most effective when designed as temporary — the front end of a trajectory toward self-reliance and national ownership. The evidence shows that trajectory does not reliably materialise.

3. UNHCR's Emergency Delivery Persists Past the Point Where States Should Take Responsibility

UNHCR's emergency delivery model is designed for onset, but the evaluation record shows it often persisting well into protracted displacement, running alongside national systems rather than connecting refugees to them. The absence of exit planning at design is the consistent factor, which three country case studies exemplify. The evaluation of the Southern African Migration Management Project established that exit strategies must be prepared at the onset of a project, with action plans owned by all stakeholders from the start rather than constructed at the end when sustainability is already at risk.¹³ In Bulgaria, the evaluation found that UNHCR's efforts would have limited long-term impact without stronger integration into national systems; sustainability depends on government ownership and transition strategies that short planning cycles have not generated.¹⁴ And across the Sahel emergency, there lacked guidance for transition after the L3 declaration; country offices implemented programmes they could not sustain and had to scale back when the declaration ended.¹⁵

Where exit planning is absent, parallel structures take root. In Kenya, UNHCR managed a parallel system of more than 100 refugee schools, aligned with the national curriculum and examinations in the hope that they could eventually be integrated into the government system.¹⁶ In Bangladesh, the emergency response that stabilised the Rohingya crisis gave way to a protracted situation in which near total dependence on food aid and relief left the population vulnerable to any shift in funding, logistics, or politics.⁶ The Brazil evaluation found that prioritising emergency solutions over durable outcomes, without planning for transition, contributed to challenges that persisted as displacement became protracted.⁷

Handover, when planned at all, often comes late. The evaluation of UNHCR's phase-down across Angola, Botswana, and Namibia found that governments were not ready to take on protection responsibilities when UNHCR withdrew, and that the conditions assumed to be in place for a safe handover were not.¹⁷ The pattern persists in more recent contexts: two and a half years into Ukraine's armed conflict, the humanitarian system had still not articulated a transition plan placing coordination under national leadership.¹⁸ In South Sudan, the problem took a different form: safeguards required for handing over protection sites to government were identified only after the handover had occurred.¹⁹

"Current UNHCR institutional support to government is based on helping it to be functional, without a long-term plan to hand over responsibilities."¹⁹

The evaluations also document successful transitions when planning for handover begins at the start of the response. In Brazil, the gradual transfer of shelter management to the

Government demonstrated UNHCR's commitment to sustainability and the strengthening of national emergency response capacity.⁷ In Chad, UNHCR's close collaboration with the Education and Health ministries produced a strong integration outcome because UNHCR had positioned itself as a technical partner rather than a provider running a parallel system.¹⁶

4. Self-Reliance Requires Inclusion in National Systems, Which States Enable and UNHCR Supports

The evaluations are consistent that enabling refugee self-reliance requires the contributions of host governments, development actors, and UNHCR, and that each plays a distinct role. The global livelihoods evaluation concludes that UNHCR has neither the technical expertise nor the capacity to deliver individual-level livelihood interventions at the scale required; its comparative advantage lies in knowing refugees and understanding the legal frameworks that enable refugee self-reliance.²⁰ The South Sudan evaluation confirms that UNHCR's comparative advantage is mobilising joint responses and enabling others to respond rather than implementing livelihoods projects itself.¹⁹ More recently, in Southern Africa, the evaluation of UNHCR's Stepped-Up Strategy finds that the catalytic role identified as essential for advancing livelihoods and economic inclusion is not fully exercised; operational delivery dominates, and opportunities to connect livelihoods work to broader planning and financing frameworks are not pursued.²¹

When UNHCR does not exercise its catalytic role, the legal space that states have opened does not necessarily lead to refugee inclusion. The CRRF evaluation finds that in the majority of participating countries refugees have the right to work on paper, but structural economic, administrative, and in some cases cultural barriers prevent actual participation in the labour market.²³ In Southern Africa, policy frameworks increasingly acknowledge refugee inclusion and self-reliance, but that recognition is not matched by institutional embedding. Refugees remain largely excluded from national planning processes and financing mechanisms.²¹

Inclusion in national systems requires financing for which states hosting large refugee populations often lack the fiscal space to provide alone. Mobilising development actors and international financial institutions is where UNHCR's contribution to self-reliance is most productive. In Jordan, cooperation between UNHCR and development actors supported the government's decision to extend work permits to refugees; a quantitative impact analysis shows that holding a permit has a much more positive effect on employment outcomes than other interventions.²² Similarly, in Mauritania, UNHCR's work with the World Bank was instrumental in advancing refugee inclusion, catalysing investments in health, electrification, and water infrastructure that benefited both refugees and host communities.²⁴ The IGAD education evaluation establishes the principle across multiple country contexts that financing is a necessary enabler of inclusion, and that states with limited fiscal space require international support, including subsidised loans from international financial institutions, to meet both the one-off and recurrent costs that refugee inclusion entails.⁸ The evaluations attribute the gains in self-reliance that have materialised not to UNHCR's direct programming but to host states opening legal and economic space and to development actors and international financial institutions providing what UNHCR does not.

*"Enabling refugees to become more self-reliant is a gradual process that requires the support of host governments, development donors and UNHCR. These stakeholders have a shared responsibility."*²²

5. Durable Solutions Rest with States and UNHCR's Role is to Facilitate Them

Voluntary return, resettlement, and local integration are pathways that provide closure to refugees' need for international protection. A decade of evidence assesses these durable solutions and shows that UNHCR's effectiveness across all three depends on how early and how well it engages the states responsible for delivering them. Across the Sudan multi-country response, UNHCR ensures that commitments to all three are embedded in national asylum laws and displacement strategies from the outset, establishing the legal foundation that all three pathways require.¹⁰ On voluntary return, UNHCR-led coordination of repatriation operations is widely assessed as effective, producing results where tasks are time-bound, divisions of labour are clear, and objectives are well defined.²⁵ Resource allocation and programme practice continue, however, to favour repatriation support over reintegration, and the model UNHCR most commonly deploys for facilitated returns does not address the needs of the majority of returnees, those who return spontaneously outside formal repatriation frameworks.²⁵ As displacement has become more protracted globally, the same evaluation finds voluntary repatriation less feasible as a near-term solution for the majority of refugees than it was a decade ago.²⁵

*"In each of the country contexts evaluated, UNHCR ensured that a commitment to durable solutions (including voluntary repatriation, resettlement and local integration) were included in asylum laws (Egypt and Chad) and relevant displacement strategies (South Sudan)."*¹⁰

On resettlement, fewer than one per cent of refugees are resettled each year, a ceiling set by resettlement states, not by UNHCR. For example, the Central American protection transfer arrangement is fully reliant on resettlement countries' own definitions of admissible profiles, a quota UNHCR can press to raise but not determine.²⁶ In Niger, positioning resettlement as the primary durable solution generates unrealistic expectations among refugees when quotas are insufficient to meet demand.²⁷ Where resettlement places are available, UNHCR's coordination and processing capacity produce results, as demonstrated by the resettlement of Bhutanese refugees from Nepal.²⁸

Of the three durable solutions, local integration is where UNHCR's contribution is most direct, and the evidence shows what it can achieve. In Mexico, local integration proves a necessary and effective strategy for thousands of refugees who choose to remain, succeeding where UNHCR supports the process from the outset alongside government and specialist partners.²⁹ In Morocco, local integration has become the pragmatic strategy of choice given limited resettlement places and the absence of safe return conditions.² In Ecuador, efforts to strengthen neighbourhood organisations and community spaces in areas with high refugee concentrations foster social cohesion and facilitate local integration.³⁰

The 50by35 goal requires that solutions are pursued from the outset of displacement. Where UNHCR engages the responsible actors early, supporting countries of origin to create return conditions, advocating for resettlement places, and enabling host states to open integration pathways, the evidence shows results. Where that engagement comes late, or where the responsible actors do not act, the goal recedes.

6. Conclusion

Refugee protection is the legal obligation of host states, and the evaluation record locates UNHCR's contribution at its strongest when states meet that obligation and invite its support. At the onset of displacement, when state capacity is overwhelmed, UNHCR delivers protection, registration, and life-sustaining assistance effectively. It is weakest at the transition from delivery to support for national ownership: emergency structures persist, handover is unplanned, and refugees remain on parallel UNHCR assistance rather than being included in the national systems through which self-reliance and solutions become possible.

The evaluations support a UNHCR that plans the end of its operational role from the beginning of every response. Self-reliance is reached where states open legal and economic space and development actors provide the financing and jobs that UNHCR does not. Durable solutions follow where UNHCR supports the responsible actors from the outset rather than substituting for them.

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. [UNHCR Country Strategy Evaluation: Egypt](#) (2021), p. 52.
2. [UNHCR Country Portfolio Evaluation: Morocco \(2016–2019\)](#) (2020), pp. 41, 44.
3. [Evaluation of the UNHCR Quality Integration Project in the United Kingdom](#) (2017), p. 29.
4. [Joint Evaluation of the Protection of the Rights of Refugees During the COVID-19 Pandemic](#) (2022), p. 75.
5. [UNHCR Country Portfolio Evaluation: Angola \(2016–2019\)](#) (2020), p. 5.
6. [Independent Evaluation of UNHCR's Emergency Response to the Rohingya Refugee Influx in Bangladesh](#) (2018), p. 87.
7. [Country Strategy Evaluation Brazil \(2021–2024\)](#) (2025), pp. 81, 82.
8. [An Evaluation of Progress of the Inclusion of Refugees in National Education Systems in the IGAD Member States](#) (2024), pp. 10, 68.
9. [Evaluation of UNHCR's Response to the L3 Emergency in Afghanistan 2021–2022](#) (2023), pp. 56, 54.
10. [Evaluation of UNHCR's Multi-country L3 Emergency Response to the Sudan Situation](#) (2025), pp. 79, 73.
11. [Evaluation of UNHCR's Level 3 Regional Refugee Emergency Response to the Crisis in Ukraine](#) (2023), p. 66.
12. [Evaluation of UNHCR's Response to the L3 South Sudan Refugee Crisis in Uganda and Ethiopia](#) (2015), p. 13.
13. [Independent Joint Final Evaluation of the Southern African Migration Management Project \(SAMM\)](#) (2025), p. 42.
14. [Country Strategy Evaluation Bulgaria](#) (2025), p. 64.
15. [UNHCR's Response to Multiple Emergencies in the Central Sahel Region](#) (2022), p. 83.
16. [Longitudinal Evaluation of UNHCR's Age, Gender and Diversity \(AGD\) Policy: Final Report](#) (2023), pp. 74, 79.
17. [Evaluation of UNHCR's Country Operations in Angola, Botswana and Namibia](#) (2018), p. 27.
18. [Evaluation of UNHCR's L3 Response in Ukraine](#) (2024), p. 79.
19. [Country Strategy Evaluation South Sudan \(2018–2022\)](#) (2023), pp. 99, 96.
20. [Evaluation of UNHCR's Livelihoods Strategies and Approaches \(2014–2018\)](#) (2018), p. 62.
21. [Evaluation of the Implementation of UNHCR's Southern Africa Regional Stepped-Up Livelihoods and Economic Inclusion Strategy 2021–2024](#) (2025), p. 73.
22. [Evaluation of UNHCR's Engagement in Humanitarian-Development Cooperation](#) (2021), pp. 84, 85.
23. [Two Year Progress Assessment of the CRRF Approach September 2016–September 2018](#) (2018), p. 64.
24. [Country Strategy Evaluation Mauritania 2020–2022](#) (2023), pp. 90, 88.
25. [Repatriation Programmes and Activities 2015–2021](#) (2022), p. 90.
26. [Evaluation of the Effectiveness of the Protection Transfer Arrangement in Central America](#) (2018), p. 24.
27. [Evaluation of the Emergency Transit Mechanism Project in Niger](#) (2025), p. 34.
28. [Country Strategy Evaluation: Nepal](#) (2022), p. 66.
29. [Country Strategy Evaluation Mexico \(2017–2020\)](#) (2022), p. 54.
30. [Country Strategy Evaluation Ecuador \(2019–2022\)](#) (2023), p. 60.