

# SELF-RELIANCE AND INCLUSION

## EVALUATION EVIDENCE FOR STRATEGIC DIRECTIONS 2027–2031



# Self-Reliance and Inclusion

## 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 13 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.

**In brief.** Self-reliance depends on entitlements, specific rights and benefits such as civil documentation, the right to work, and access to education and health services, that not all refugees receive on arrival. Refugees who secure only one entitlement do not experience improved self-reliance. When refugees secure several together, self-reliance does improve. Including refugees in national systems is the pathway through which host states deliver many of these entitlements. Several evaluations document refugees' formal inclusion in national systems, but none yet measures what that inclusion has done for their self-reliance. As duty bearers, governments are bound to include refugees, but five distinct barriers stand in the way: refugees' invisibility in national data systems, governments' limited fiscal space, governance capacity lagging behind legal commitment, structural barriers beneath otherwise secure legal rights, and UNHCR's own inconsistency in connecting its programming to national systems.

## 1. Self-Reliance Requires Several Entitlements Together, Not Just One

Evaluations across contexts show that refugees who secure only one entitlement (the right to work, documentation, freedom of movement, or education), or no entitlement at all, do not see self-reliance improve. In Bangladesh, refugees lack freedom of movement, formal access to public education, and the legal right to work, and remain almost entirely dependent on food aid as a result.<sup>1</sup> In Greece, refugees secure the right to work, yet remain dependent on cash assistance to meet basic needs, working in the informal market instead.<sup>2</sup> Among refugees who complete tertiary education through the DAFI scholarship, half remain out of employment, education or training, a rate roughly double what's seen where work-transition legislation is more favourable.<sup>3</sup>

Securing one entitlement without the conditions to exercise it fully produces a partial gain in self-reliance, not the fuller improvement refugees attain when they enjoy several rights together. In Peru, refugees have the right to work and are more economically active than Peruvians, 80 percent against 72 percent, yet four in five work informally, kept out of formal jobs by certification rules and quotas on foreign workers.<sup>4</sup> In Morocco, refugees with valid documentation save part of their income at close to double the rate of undocumented refugees (17 percent against 9 percent), yet even among documented refugees, fewer than one in five build any savings at all.<sup>4</sup>

The evaluation record shows that when refugees secure several entitlements together, self-reliance improves. In Jordan and Kenya, refugees with work permits and resident status, alongside access to infrastructure such as electricity, credit and communication, show significantly strengthened economic self-reliance.<sup>5</sup> One policy change can secure two entitlements at once. In Thailand, a policy allowing camp-based refugees to work also lets their employer request permission to relocate them outside the camp, and in Ethiopia, policy

progress on the right to work has moved together with expanding freedom of movement.<sup>4</sup> In Costa Rica, the type of employment contract obtained by newly arrived refugees deteriorated after work-permit restrictions were introduced in 2022, and improved after the restrictions were reversed in June 2024.<sup>4</sup>

*"The benefits of inclusion emerge more clearly from rigorous quantitative analyses than from an analysis of refugee perceptions: service inclusion demonstrably strengthens economic self-reliance and also has a positive effect on refugees' sense of well-being."<sup>5</sup>*

## 2. National System Inclusion Has Been Achieved in Several Contexts, but Not Yet Shown to Produce Self-Reliance

Several evaluations document refugees' formal inclusion in national government systems, but none yet measures what that inclusion has done for their self-reliance. In Ethiopia, UNHCR co-drafted the country's Refugee Proclamation and a roadmap for integrating refugees into national systems governing documentation, work, and basic public services.<sup>4</sup> The reforms produced measurable uptake, 4,035 work permits and 1,615 business licences issued to refugees in 2024, though refugees still face a separate application process and lengthy waiting periods that limit how far this translates into practice.<sup>4</sup> No evaluation has yet measured what this access has done for refugees' self-reliance. In Brazil, UNHCR's advocacy created a favourable environment for refugee employability and promoted initiatives meant to strengthen refugees' autonomy and foster their inclusion in national programmes. The same evaluation found the overall impact has remained limited, constrained by unrecognised foreign qualifications, labour-market discrimination, and continued dependence on financial support, particularly for the most vulnerable groups it serves.<sup>6</sup>

The Mauritania evaluation measures this pathway's effect on household income and service quality in more granular detail than Ethiopia or Brazil. UNHCR and WFP profiled refugee households in Mbera camp using the same methodology as the national social registry, establishing eligibility for government social protection payments where none had existed.<sup>5</sup> The measured result is modest at best. Registered households gained only about US\$13 per distribution, while refugees excluded from the registry, in some cases simply for being absent when the assessment took place, saw their overall assistance reduced.<sup>5</sup> A parallel handover in health services (from Médecins Sans Frontières to government management under a new fee-based system) produced a measured decline. Refugees reported fewer medical staff, less medication, longer waits, and a loss of the free care every camp resident had received under NGO management.<sup>5</sup>

*"With MSF, it was like a lake, water was available for everybody. Now, it is like a water well, you need power to extract water, and not everybody has that power."<sup>5</sup>*

The 2021 evaluation of UNHCR's engagement in humanitarian-development cooperation tested the payoff national system inclusion is widely assumed to deliver. Part of UNHCR's own narrative is that advances in refugee self-reliance and inclusion generate savings substantial enough to let UNHCR scale down its activities in protracted contexts, an expectation some donors share. The evaluation checked this claim across every context it covered and found the savings had not materialised, and most stakeholders interviewed did not expect this to change in the short to medium term.<sup>7</sup> The evidence available now supports that national

system inclusion can be achieved. It does not yet support that inclusion, once achieved, produces self-reliance.

### 3. Five Distinct Barriers Stand Between Refugees and National System Inclusion

As duty bearers, governments are bound to include refugees in national systems, but five distinct barriers stand in the way. Refugees are often invisible in national data systems. Governments often lack the fiscal space to extend services to them. Governance capacity lags behind legal commitment. Structural barriers persist beneath legal rights that are otherwise secure. And UNHCR's own role connecting its livelihoods programming to national systems is exercised inconsistently.

Refugees are often excluded from the national surveys and social protection registries that would let governments extend eligibility to them, and UNHCR frequently lacks, or cannot share, comparable data of its own.<sup>5</sup> This barrier alone has a demonstrated fix, shown by three countries using three different routes. Peru's national statistics office built a refugee survey using its own household-survey methodology and is now working to include refugees in the regular survey itself.<sup>4</sup> Costa Rica successfully advocated to add refugee-specific variables directly into the national household survey.<sup>4</sup> And Morocco achieved the same result by funding the national statistics office responsible for it.<sup>4</sup>

Fiscal space is a separate constraint, and it falls hardest on governments already stretched thin. Including refugees in national health, education, and social protection systems carries recurrent costs that exceed what low-income, high-caseload host governments can absorb, and international financing has not made up the difference.<sup>8</sup> In education, the evidence is concrete: IGAD Member States, investing below global benchmarks in their own citizens' education even before accounting for refugees, cannot sustain the ongoing costs of teacher salaries and capitation grants (the per-student funding that scales automatically as refugee enrolment grows) and international donors have focused their support on one-off investments, infrastructure, system reform, rather than these recurring obligations.<sup>8</sup> No low-income, host government with a large refugee population in this evidence base has found the funding to overcome the shortfall. Where national systems are already functional and better resourced, as in Greece, Peru, and Costa Rica, UNHCR can orient its work around inclusion in those systems instead of building parallel provision.<sup>4</sup>

Governance capacity lags behind legal commitment, and progress against this constraint is partial. A strong legal framework for refugee inclusion in national education systems now exists across the IGAD states, yet refugee learners remain functionally excluded, because the governance and management structures needed to operationalise that framework lag behind it.<sup>8</sup> Kenya shows what partial progress looks like. Refugee schools there now follow the national curriculum, calendar, and examinations, even while still run as a parallel system, pending eventual integration.<sup>9</sup>

Structural barriers can persist beneath a legal right that is otherwise secure, but they can also drop quickly when a crisis forces political priorities to shift. In the majority of CRRF countries, refugees have the right to work, yet economic, administrative, and in some cases cultural barriers to the labour market impede their participation in practice.<sup>10</sup> During the COVID-19 pandemic, refugees were almost universally included in national vaccination plans within a single year, though practical and legal barriers kept actual vaccination numbers low regardless.<sup>11</sup>

*"In the majority of CRRF countries refugees have the right to work. However, as a result of structural economic, administrative and, in some cases, cultural barriers to the labour market, in practice the majority of refugees' participation is effectively impeded, or the terms on which refugees can participate in the labour market are reduced."*<sup>10</sup>

UNHCR's own inconsistency in connecting livelihoods programming to national systems is the fifth constraint, and it recurs across regions. In Southern Africa, the technical leadership and convening work needed to connect these programmes to national planning systems was not consistently exercised, and operations defaulted to fragmented, project-based delivery instead.<sup>12</sup> In West and Central Africa, the same pattern produced the same result by a different route. Livelihoods support that was not integrated into national social protection and safety net systems failed to produce self-reliance regardless of how well the activity itself performed. Integration, not activity quality, was what determined success.<sup>13</sup>

## 4. Conclusion

These five barriers do not share a solution because they do not share a source. UNHCR resolved data invisibility because it is a technical problem UNHCR can solve directly, alongside a willing government partner. Three more, fiscal space, labour market access, and governance capacity, sit further out of reach, constrained by what finance ministries, labour ministries, and line ministries will fund, permit, and build, not by what UNHCR proposes to them. The fifth is not out of reach at all. UNHCR's own inconsistency in connecting its programming to national systems is a decision entirely within UNHCR's own command.

The Strategic Directions describe national system inclusion as a single strategic objective. The evidence in this paper says it is several distinct undertakings, proceeding at different speeds, with different counterparts, on different time horizons. UNHCR's voice carries furthest where it is well targeted, at finance ministries on fiscal space, at line ministries on governance and management capacity, at labour ministries on market access, rather than directed at inclusion as an undifferentiated cause. Naming that difference, and directing UNHCR's advocacy accordingly, gives the strategy a more precise instrument than treating inclusion as one lever to pull.

## 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. [Independent evaluation of UNHCR's emergency response to the Rohingya refugees influx in Bangladesh](#) (2018), p. 87.
2. [Evaluation of the effects of cash-based interventions on protection outcomes in Greece](#) (2018), p. 14.
3. [Tertiary Education Scholarship Programme \(DAFI\)](#) (2022), p. 72.
4. *Evaluation of UNHCR's Approach to Economic Inclusion and Self-Reliance in Urban Areas*, unpublished, UNHCR (forthcoming), pp. 47–48, 39, 46, 25, 37, 26–27, 14.
5. [UNHCR's Engagement in Humanitarian-Development Cooperation Post-2021: How to Stay the Course](#) (2023), pp. 60, 41, 57–58.
6. [Country Strategy Evaluation Brazil](#) (2025), p. 81.
7. [Evaluation of UNHCR's Engagement in Humanitarian-Development Cooperation](#) (2021), p. 86.
8. [An Evaluation of Progress of the Inclusion of Refugees in National Education Systems in the IGAD Member States](#) (2024), pp. 66, 65.
9. [Longitudinal evaluation of UNHCR's Age, Gender and Diversity \(AGD\) policy: Final report](#) (2023), p. 74.
10. [Two-Year Progress Assessment of the CRRF Approach, September 2016 – September 2018](#) (2018), p. 64.
11. [Joint Evaluation of the Protection of the Rights of Refugees During the COVID-19 Pandemic](#) (2022), p. 76.
12. [Final report of the evaluation of the implementation of UNHCR's Southern Africa Regional Stepped-up Livelihood and Economic Inclusion Strategy](#) (2026), pp. 72–73.
13. [Evaluation of UNHCR's Support to Health, Education, and Economic Inclusion in West and Central Africa](#) (2024), p. 84.

