

STATELESS PERSONS

EVALUATION EVIDENCE FOR STRATEGIC
DIRECTIONS 2027–2031



Stateless 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 6 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 stateless people, asking whether its commitment to consistent action across operations is met. Part of this evidence also appears in the paper on UNHCR as Advocate and Catalyst, which uses a systems-level lens.

In brief. UNHCR's contribution to ending statelessness plays to its core strengths in law, advocacy, and convening, and the record shows real progress: laws reformed, registration systems improved, and hundreds of thousands of stateless people granted a nationality over the past decade. Whether that work succeeds at all depends first on the government concerned, since nationality is the state's alone to grant; where a government is less willing, UNHCR can urge reform but cannot compel action. Given a willing government, the outcome then depends on UNHCR's own effort, and the evaluations found this varied: an operation acts on statelessness when its leadership makes it a priority and staff and funding are dedicated to it, and lapses when they are not. Because the work is slow and rarely urgent, it is the first to recede when an emergency pulls staff and resources elsewhere. Ending statelessness also requires more than what UNHCR can do on its own, since the deeper causes, the gaps in reliable data, and the parts of government that hold nationality and identity extend beyond its sphere of influence. The evaluations conclude that UNHCR's contribution is strongest when it concentrates on this mandate-anchored, bounded role, sustained across operations and shared with partners who cover what it cannot do alone.

1. Where UNHCR Applies Its Legal and Advocacy Strengths, Statelessness Work Delivers

UNHCR's contribution to ending statelessness rests on expertise in nationality law, norm-setting, and government engagement. Drawing on these, the dedicated evaluation of its statelessness initiatives credited UNHCR with helping some 754,500 people acquire a nationality over the preceding decade, more than 340,000 of them after the campaign to end statelessness began.¹

The country cases show what this work achieves. In Tajikistan, sustained UNHCR advocacy alongside a coalition of partners helped secure a new constitutional law on nationality and a subsequent amnesty law, followed by civil registration reform carried out with UNDP and UNICEF.² In Côte d'Ivoire, which held the largest stateless population among the countries examined, a reform of the nationality law opened a route for in-situ stateless people to acquire documents.¹ In Kenya, the Makonde community, stateless for generations, were recognised as citizens, and in the Philippines UNHCR supported accession to the 1954 Convention and the creation of a joint procedure to determine statelessness.¹ In Mauritania, a change to the nationality law reduced the risk of statelessness, and the courts handed down more than 300 judgements that allowed stateless people to obtain documents.³

The work runs in both directions. It resolves the situation of those already stateless by helping them acquire a nationality, and prevents new statelessness by reforming the nationality laws

and registration systems through which it arises. It is most effective when built into an operation's strategy rather than treated as a secondary concern. In Senegal, the multi-country office structured its strategy around statelessness as a core pillar alongside solutions, a design the evaluation judged innovative for linking statelessness to the wider country programme.⁴ At the global level, the Global Action Plan to End Statelessness gave the iBelong campaign its framework. Spanning ten actions broad enough to apply across very different contexts, it offered states, UNHCR, and partners a common structure, and high-level events drew pledges and political attention.¹

"UNHCR has been particularly successful in implementing initiatives to address the legal and administrative causes of statelessness, which align with its institutional strengths."¹

2. Whether Statelessness Is Prevented or Resolved Depends on the Will of the States Involved

Nationality is granted and withheld by states, so whether statelessness is prevented or resolved turns on the willingness of the state, and often more than one state, whose laws determine whether a person is granted its nationality. UNHCR can advise, advocate, and build the case for reform, but it cannot compel a government to reform its laws or grant nationality. The Nepal evaluation put the dependency plainly: where the legal framework, political will, and geopolitics align with UNHCR's objectives there is real opportunity for success, and where they do not, the room to act narrows sharply.⁵

Progress is therefore uneven, because political will varies from state to state. Where the will to act exists, results follow: Kyrgyzstan resolved all its known cases of statelessness, with further gains recorded in countries as different as Thailand, Malaysia, and Viet Nam.¹ Where it is absent, even sustained effort struggles. Myanmar absorbed the single largest share of UNHCR's statelessness spending over the period, yet remains among the most entrenched statelessness situations in the world, because the political will to resolve it is absent.¹

The dependence on conditions outside UNHCR's control also makes progress reversible. The evaluation found that ending statelessness is a long-term undertaking, highly dependent on political will and susceptible to setbacks. Competing demands on UNHCR's attention, including major refugee emergencies and the COVID-19 pandemic, repeatedly drew focus away from statelessness and slowed the gains already made.¹

"Progress in preventing and addressing statelessness is contingent on the goodwill of States, as it is their responsibility and only States can take the necessary steps to prevent statelessness and provide nationality."¹

3. UNHCR's Progress on Statelessness Depends on Leadership, Resourcing, and Planning

Even where a government is willing, progress depends on UNHCR putting leadership, staff, and resources behind efforts to end statelessness, and the evidence shows it has done so inconsistently. The statelessness evaluation found Country Representatives to be the single most critical influence on whether an operation engages on statelessness, shaping whether it is funded and staffed, whether the operation lobbies governments, and whether sensitive issues are raised at all.¹ Dedicated staffing was a critical success factor; where staff were

stretched too thin or lacked the requisite advocacy skills, statelessness was among the first areas deprioritised.¹

Funding shows the same deprioritisation. As the known stateless population grew, the share of UNHCR's expenditure going to statelessness fell, from 1.6 to 0.9 per cent over the decade.¹ Donors did not close the gap, and the one special appeal devoted to statelessness failed.¹ Statelessness is long-term, low-visibility work, and it is the first to give way when a new emergency erupts.

Strategic planning at the country level has been no more consistent. The statelessness evaluation found UNHCR working without a strong theory of change for ending statelessness, relying on a global strategy and implementation plan to set direction.¹ That plan sets out the activities operations should pursue, but the evaluation found it had not consistently translated into statelessness work in operations' own plans and budgets.¹ Tajikistan shows what that disconnect costs. There, UNHCR's advocacy for the Amnesty Law helped thousands of stateless people acquire documentation, yet the evaluation found a gap between the operation's strategic intentions and what it executed on the ground, with capacity-building that lacked a long-term strategy and a protection response that stayed reactive, its statelessness gains outpaced by systemic challenges it had not planned for.² The evaluation drew the lesson plainly, that programming requires a long-term vision rather than one-off, short-term activities.²

Ukraine shows how quickly statelessness loses momentum when an emergency draws resources away. When the internal displacement emergency began, management attention, advocacy capital, staff, and programme resources were pulled from the existing refugee and statelessness programmes toward the emergency.⁶ Because the statelessness programme was the less established of the two, its planned initiatives stalled and a planned survey was postponed.⁶ Statelessness rarely has ring-fenced staff or funding, so it loses ground whenever finite staff and resources are drawn toward more urgent demands.

"The ambitions of the campaign and the organization's clear mandate for statelessness have not been met with commensurate UNHCR statelessness budgets nor efforts to systematically mainstream statelessness within UNHCR."¹

4. Ending Statelessness Requires More Than UNHCR Can Do Alone

The statelessness evaluation found that UNHCR addresses one part of a larger problem. Its strengths in law and advocacy target the legal and administrative causes, but the deeper political and economic drivers, and the exclusion from public services and the formal economy it brings, extend beyond what UNHCR's mandate and expertise can resolve.¹ A bounded role is not a shortcoming: the evaluation judged that the wider factors of statelessness fall to others, and that UNHCR is right to concentrate where its strengths lie.¹

"The organization has not responded to all of the drivers and impacts of statelessness, nor should it."¹

The invisibility of stateless people and those at risk has hampered progress, because without reliable data on how many people are stateless and how statelessness affects their lives, UNHCR struggles to prompt governments to act.¹ Such data is strongest where political will already exists, and weakest where it does not, leaving the countries that most need attention the hardest to influence.¹

Engaging the relevant parts of government is a further hurdle. Statelessness is resolved through the institutions that govern nationality and identity, civil registration offices, interior ministries, justice ministries, which lie outside the circle of refugee-facing counterparts UNHCR works with most closely. Building those partnerships takes deliberate investment, and that investment competes with everything else an operation must do. In Ukraine, the evaluation judged these relationships underdeveloped, while acknowledging that UNHCR's advocacy capital is finite and has to be spent selectively.⁶

Progress therefore depends on collaboration. UNHCR has mobilised many partners, but the evaluation found the sense of shared responsibility for ending statelessness not yet strong enough, and saw room for UNHCR to convene a wider set of actors, including stateless people themselves, and to make fuller use of cooperation across the UN system.¹

5. Conclusion

Statelessness is core to UNHCR's mandate, and the work draws on capabilities few other actors hold: the command of nationality law, the standing to press governments, and the power to convene those who must act. Where these are brought to bear, the results are real and lasting, as people who were stateless acquire a nationality and attendant rights.

The Strategic Directions commit UNHCR to addressing statelessness consistently across its operations, and the evidence shows that commitment is not yet met. Sustained attention has depended too heavily on the will of particular governments, the priorities of particular leaders, and funding that has not kept pace, so the countries where statelessness is most entrenched are too often those where attention is thinnest. Closing that gap means holding statelessness steady when other demands compete, concentrating on the legal and advocacy work UNHCR does best, and building the shared responsibility that ending statelessness requires. A mandate consistently honoured, rather than expanded, is what the evidence supports.

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-led Initiatives to End Statelessness](#) (2021), pp. 5, 36, 9, 10, 38, 7, 26, 64.
2. [Country Strategy Evaluation Tajikistan](#) (2024), pp. 76, 79.
3. [Country Strategy Evaluation Mauritania](#) (2023), p. 53.
4. [Country Strategy Evaluation Senegal MCO](#) (2025), p. 61.
5. [Country Strategy Evaluation: Nepal](#) (2022), p. 67.
6. [Evaluation of UNHCR's Ukraine Country Programme](#) (2017), pp. 80, 87.