

UNHCR AS ADVOCATE AND CATALYST

EVALUATION EVIDENCE FOR STRATEGIC
DIRECTIONS 2027–2031



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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 28 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 advocacy and catalytic role through a systems-level lens, asking when advocacy shifts government and partner behaviour and when it does not. Part of this evidence also appears in the paper on Stateless Persons, where advocacy is the primary mode of engagement for that population.

In brief. UNHCR advocacy produces measurable results in law, policy, and practice. It does so, however, only when four conditions align: a willing government counterpart, sustained multi-year investment, a robust evidence base, and delivery through coalitions rather than bilateral engagement alone. UNHCR's institutional design rarely facilitates all four. The planning, staffing, and funding systems that govern how UNHCR operates were built for an organisation that delivers humanitarian services directly, not one that influences others to do so. Its most durable advocacy contribution is catalytic: building national actors' capacity to advocate, generating evidence that shifts government positions, and positioning development financing behind inclusion. Yet this catalytic role is also what annual planning cycles, project-based funding, and staff rotation structurally undercut. The evidence shows why these institutional misalignments persist and what is needed to resolve them.

1. The Government Counterpart, Not UNHCR's Approach, Determines Advocacy Outcomes

The decisive variable in UNHCR advocacy is not the quality of its approach, it is whether the government counterpart is willing to engage. Where that condition is met, the evidence is consistent: a systematic evaluation of UNHCR's advocacy in Europe documented 25 instances of law, policy or practice change (e.g., guardianship legislation in Greece, family reunification policy in Germany) achieved through sustained engagement, legal expertise, and coalition work.¹ In Morocco, a comprehensive, collaborative and diplomatic approach built sufficient mutual trust to contribute to asylum law reform and the creation of a GCR national action plan; in Brazil, sustained advocacy with the national asylum authority produced *prima facie* group recognition of Venezuelan asylum claims.^{7,8} The Nepal evaluation captures the enabling logic with precision: when legal framework, political will, and geopolitics align with UNHCR's objectives, greater opportunity for success exists; when any one of the three is absent, UNHCR's ability to fulfil its mandate becomes highly limited because it lacks the leverage of other actors.⁹

“Advocacy gains are most durable where UNHCR maintains sustained, direct engagement with decision-makers. Evidence showed stronger policy traction where UNHCR had ongoing government access, and weaker outcomes where engagement was ad hoc or delegated.”¹⁸

The inverse is equally documented. In the Republic of Korea, UNHCR built jurisprudence and procedural safeguards across the evaluation period, but structural barriers limited progress in advancing international protection standards because political sensitivities constrained policy

prioritisation; the refugee recognition rate remained at 2.7 per cent despite a functioning Refugee Act.⁵ In Tajikistan, UNHCR's supervisory mandate had been obstructed since 2014; cooperation with the government enabled refugee access to national services, but the core protection advocacy function was structurally constrained throughout.⁶ In Afghanistan, UNHCR achieved significant advocacy gains on the CRRF with government but found it difficult to develop effective transition strategies because the transformational institutional change needed remained unlikely in the near term.¹⁰ The implication is clear: enabling and restrictive environments are distinct, each requiring different planning assumptions, resource allocations, and measures of success. The evaluations show no systematic evidence that UNHCR plans or resources these two contexts differently.

2. UNHCR's Planning, Budgeting, and Staffing Systems Are Not Designed for Advocacy

UNHCR's planning, budgeting, and staffing systems function as though designed for an organisation that delivers services directly, not one that influences others to do so. The EU advocacy evaluation, the most systematic analysis of the advocacy function across the evaluations, is precise on what is absent: planning systems that embed advocacy outcomes in strategic priorities; financial instruments that support multi-year investment; dedicated staffing with the communications, policy analysis, and stakeholder management skills the function requires; and knowledge management that enables learning across the region. None of these exist consistently. Advocacy is carried out as one task among many, by staff without dedicated time, support, or training. In most contexts examined, it is an individual responsibility, not an institutional one.¹

The consequences are visible wherever advocacy depends on sustained institutional commitment. In Zambia, the country strategy evaluation found no clear advocacy strategy, no opportunities utilised to their potential, and no high-level institutional platform through which policy and legal reform could be addressed; UNHCR was hobbled in its ambition to leverage strategic influence precisely because those platforms are absent.¹² The statelessness evaluation makes the same failure concrete with staffing data: only 14 dedicated statelessness officers existed globally in 2020, against 108 RSD officers. Where staff are stretched too thin, statelessness is consistently the first area deprioritised — not because the mandate is unclear, but because no institutional mechanism holds the priority in place when individual commitment wavers.²

The protection strategies evaluation adds the planning dimension. Limitations on SGBV, education, and child protection advocacy partly reflected UNHCR's own procedures: annual budget cycles, discretion in indicator selection, and strategy fatigue at country office level.³ The asylum capacity development evaluation shows what this costs at the functional level: UNHCR has invested in lobbying, legal framework development, and training, but without a theory of change for how that investment converts to national ownership, and without the organisational and institutional layer that would make results durable. The outcome is predictable: UNHCR's approach is relatively effective where national institutional capacity is already moderately high, and less effective where institutions are weak, precisely the inverse of where the investment is most needed.¹³

“UNHCR staff carry out advocacy as a task amongst many others with little support, capacity or training. Functions are not designed for the multiple skills needed to deliver

effective advocacy, such as communications, policy analysis, stakeholder management and personal access.”¹

3. Successful Advocacy Outcomes in UNHCR's Core Mandate Areas Depend Strongly on Willing Government Partners

Willing government partners are the decisive variable across UNHCR's three core mandate areas (international protection, durable solutions, and statelessness), but the form that dependency takes, and what it costs, differs in each. Where an enabling environment is present, the evidence shows consistent results; where it is absent, UNHCR's investment in evidence, staffing, and coalition work does not compensate.^{2,11} Its investment in building the evidence base and coalitions needed to create political will remains insufficient.^{14,15,22}

On international protection, the Nordic and Baltic evaluation identifies a structural constraint that operates even where an enabling environment partially exists: UNHCR must hold states accountable on protection standards while simultaneously relying on those same states as major donors. As the protection space in Europe has become more restricted, that tension has constrained the organisation's willingness to be publicly vocal, and the evaluation finds no institutional mechanism for managing it.^{11,25,26} The constraint is not external political resistance — it is a dependency that UNHCR's own funding model creates.

“As the asylum and protection space in Europe becomes more restricted, there is the need for UNHCR to actively manage the delicate balance between its donor mobilization and protection role.”¹¹

On durable solutions, the dependency on willing government partners is most visible in what UNHCR cannot substitute for. Local integration requires a government willing to extend rights and services to refugees; self-reliance requires one willing to open labour markets and remove legal barriers; resettlement requires third-country governments willing to accept. Where governments are engaged and UNHCR builds the evidence and convenes the right actors to hold them to their commitments, the evidence shows results: Brussels Conference advocacy generated an average of US\$4.84 billion annually across the combined 3RP, HRP, and ICRC appeals over five years.¹⁴ Where that architecture is absent, even stated commitments go untracked and unmet — as both the IGAD education evaluation and the Emergency Transit Mechanism evaluation document.^{15,23,24}

On statelessness, the dependency is equally direct: UNHCR cannot resolve a single case of statelessness without a government willing to grant or recognise nationality. The evaluation of UNHCR-led initiatives to end statelessness confirms this: more progress has been made in contexts where political will already existed; in countries where the enabling environment is weakest and advocacy is most urgently needed, progress has been slowest.² The #IBelong campaign has not resolved that dependency — and UNHCR has not responded to its own campaign's ambitions with commensurate investment in generating the evidence base that might, over time, shift government positions where political will is currently absent.^{19,22} The same evaluation found that fragmented bilateral partnerships have limited progress, and that building lasting multi-stakeholder coalitions at global, regional, and country level is the more effective approach.²²

4. UNHCR's Most Durable Advocacy Results Come from Building National Capacity

Where advocacy produces durable results, the common feature is that UNHCR invested over multiple years in building the capacity, trust, and networks of national actors who then led advocacy themselves, without UNHCR substituting for them. In the Republic of Korea, UNHCR fostered an ecosystem of national organisations working on asylum and international protection, creating greater capacity for analysis, advocacy, and assistance, and laying the foundation for advancing localisation, in a context where UNHCR's own operational footprint is limited.⁵ In Peru, UNHCR's organisational development strategy for refugee-led organisations built a group of organisations that represent, influence, mobilise, and provide services to refugees and migrants, assessed as one of the operation's main achievements and an experience with potential for replication.¹⁶ In Ecuador, joint inter-agency advocacy co-led with IOM multiplied what either organisation could have achieved alone; strategic litigation with the Public Defender's Office, technical standards for children in alternative care, and regularisation advocacy all produced systemic policy changes.¹⁷

“UNHCR has played a pivotal role in fostering an ecosystem of national organisations working on asylum and international protection, creating greater capacity for analysis, advocacy, and assistance, and laying the foundation for advancing localisation.”⁵

This is the investment model that UNHCR's planning and funding systems are not configured to support consistently. Annual budget cycles do not sustain multi-year capacity building. Project-based funding ends relationships at the point of maturity. Staff rotation disrupts the institutional knowledge that this kind of advocacy accumulates.^{4,21} The ACD evaluation makes this concrete: UNHCR has focused on building individual skills without investing in the institutional structures that would make those gains durable after its own engagement ends.¹³

What distinguishes these cases is not approach or quality of staff: it is time. The humanitarian-development cooperation evaluation illustrates why time matters: cooperation that produced work permits in Jordan and infrastructure investments in Niger was possible because UNHCR had invested in the convening relationship before the crisis required it, and then stepped back rather than substituting for others when the relationship matured.²⁰ The catalytic approach is what works. UNHCR's planning and funding model is not built for it. That distinction between contexts where the investment is more likely to take root and those where it is less so is what the next section examines.

5. UNHCR Applies the Same Advocacy Approach Across Contexts, but Enabling and Restrictive Environments Require Different Responses

UNHCR knows what effective advocacy requires. Its own guidance is clear: the approach an operation takes must reflect the political environment it actually faces. The evaluations show this rarely happens however. Operations plan and invest in advocacy at the same level of ambition regardless of whether governments are willing to engage, whether political space exists, or whether the conditions for change are present. In the Republic of Korea, resistance to refugee protection persisted despite a functioning legal framework and UNHCR's sustained engagement.⁵ In Tajikistan, the core protection advocacy function remained structurally blocked throughout the evaluation period.⁶ In Afghanistan, the limits of what the government could sustain were foreseeable but not reflected in planning.¹⁰ In the Nordic and Baltic countries, donor dependency constrained how publicly vocal UNHCR could be on protection

standards, a structural tension for which no institutional response was found.^{11,26} In each case, a constraint that was visible and documented did not translate into a different plan.

Where UNHCR has understood its political environment and adjusted its approach accordingly, the results are markedly better. In Brazil, advocacy explicitly calibrated to what the political environment could support produced prima facie group recognition of Venezuelan claims, a policy outcome with national scale.⁸ In the regional response to the Ukraine crisis, UNHCR delivered a substantial and comprehensive response in Moldova, where the government was willing and engaged, and a tailored complementary response in Hungary, where it was not — two different approaches within the same regional operation.²⁸ The Sudan evaluation is the most instructive: UNHCR moved quickly and effectively when political space opened after the revolution, and struggled when the environment subsequently deteriorated because context analysis at sub-national level was inadequate.²⁷ The same organisation, the same operation, demonstrating what understanding the political environment produces and what the absence of that understanding costs.

UNHCR operations do not consistently tailor their advocacy to the political environment they face.

6. Conclusion

Across a decade of independent evaluations, one finding is consistent: UNHCR advocacy produces results where governments are willing to act, and stalls where they are not. That dependency is not a problem to be solved — it is the permanent condition under which advocacy operates. What the evaluations ask is whether UNHCR makes the most of enabling conditions when they exist, and whether it invests wisely when they do not. The evidence suggests it does neither consistently. Instead, it applies the same approach, the same ambition, and the same resources regardless of what the political environment actually permits. The most durable results across the evaluations come from operations that understood their political environment, built others' capacity to advocate, and stepped back when those actors were ready to lead. That is the model the evidence endorses. It is also, too often, the exception. UNHCR has the guidance: the Advocacy Toolkit sets out what effective advocacy requires. What the evaluations show is missing is not knowledge but the institutional conditions to act on it consistently — the planning systems, funding instruments, and staffing models that would make the toolkit's principles standard practice rather than individual initiative.²⁹

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 Effectiveness and Relevance of Advocacy Approaches with the EU and in EU-EFTA Countries](#) (2019), pp. 52-53.
2. [Evaluation of UNHCR-led Initiatives to End Statelessness](#) (2021), p. 9.
3. [Evaluation of UNHCR's Implementation of Three of its Protection Strategies: the Global Education Strategy, the Updated SGBV Strategy, and the Child Protection Framework](#) (2017), p. 5.
4. [Country Strategy Evaluation South Sudan](#) (2023), p. 99.
5. [Country Strategy Evaluation Republic of Korea](#) (2025), p. 75.
6. [Country Strategy Evaluation Tajikistan](#) (2024), p. 12.
7. [UNHCR Country Portfolio Evaluation: Morocco](#) (2020), p. 7.
8. [Country Strategy Evaluation Brazil](#) (2025), p. 78.
9. [Country Strategy Evaluation: Nepal](#) (2022), p. 11.
10. [Evaluation of UNHCR's Country Operation, Afghanistan](#) (2020), p. 46.

11. [Multi-Country Strategic Evaluation of UNHCR's Operations in Northern Europe \(Nordic and Baltic Countries\)](#) (2022), p. 60.
12. [UNHCR Country Strategy Evaluation: Zambia](#) (2021), p. 12.
13. [UNHCR Asylum Capacity Development \(ACD\) Evaluation: An Independent Evaluation of UNHCR's Support for Strengthening National Asylum Systems](#) (2022), p. 98.
14. [Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan for Syria \(3RP\) Evaluation](#) (2022), p. 53.
15. [An Evaluation of Progress of the Inclusion of Refugees in National Education Systems in the IGAD Member States](#) (2024), p. 9.
16. [Country Strategy Evaluation Peru](#) (2024), p. 94.
17. [Country Strategy Evaluation Ecuador](#) (2023), p. 59.
18. [Evaluation of the Implementation of UNHCR's Southern Africa Regional Stepped Up Livelihoods and Economic Inclusion Strategy](#) (2025), p.17.
19. [Evaluation of UNHCR's Data Use and Information Management Approaches](#) (2019), p.31
20. [Evaluation of UNHCR's Engagement in Humanitarian-Development Cooperation](#) (2021), p.85.
21. [Decentralized Evaluation of UNHCR's Livelihoods Programme in South Sudan](#) (2019), p.35.
22. [Evaluation of UNHCR-led Initiatives to End Statelessness](#) (2021), pp.64, 67.
23. [Evaluation of the Emergency Transit Mechanism Project in Niger](#) (2025), p.27.
24. [Evaluation of UNHCR's Support to Health, Education, and Economic Inclusion in West and Central Africa](#) (2024), p.83.
25. [Independent Review of UNHCR Management of Tightly Earmarked Donor Funding](#) (2026), p.83.
26. [Multi-Country Strategic Evaluation of UNHCR's Operations in Northern Europe \(Nordic and Baltic Countries\)](#) (2022), p.64.
27. [UNHCR Sudan Country Strategy Evaluation](#) (2022), p.61.
28. [Evaluation of UNHCR's Level 3 Regional Refugee Emergency Response to the Crisis in Ukraine](#) (2023), p.66.
29. [Advocacy Toolkit: Influencing Positive Outcomes for Persons of Concern to UNHCR](#) (2020).