

UNHCR AS COORDINATOR AND CONVENER

EVALUATION EVIDENCE FOR STRATEGIC
DIRECTIONS 2027–2031



UNHCR as Coordinator and Convener

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 22 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 coordination and convening role through a systems-level lens, across populations and displacement contexts. Part of this evidence also appears in the paper on Internally Displaced Persons, which examines that role in the context of operational engagement for that population specifically.

In brief. UNHCR's convening authority is real and consequential in the first phase of a refugee emergency, where its mandate is uncontested. As soon as the emergency phase ends, or a second coordination framework enters the same space, performance degrades. The reason is a structural conflict of interest that UNHCR has not resolved: it is simultaneously the coordinator, a major operational actor, and in many settings a significant funder. The conditions for effective coordination are clear: dedicated capacity, separation from operational interests, government engagement from the outset, and early transition planning. UNHCR does not consistently require these conditions institutionally. The evidence shows why this conflict persists and how it escalates in mixed settings. The record also reveals where convening has worked at the humanitarian–development nexus, and why coordination has substituted for national ownership rather than building it.

1. UNHCR's Coordination Leadership Is Strongest Where It Has a Clear Mandate and Weakest Where That Mandate Is Contested

In Ukraine, UNHCR coordinated a \$1.8 billion regional response plan engaging more than 140 partners across five countries and established an operational Cash Hub to deliver assistance across the region.⁸ In Sudan, investment in the RCM established credible leadership with 80–90 operational partners in a compressed timeframe, with regular operational updates and active partner engagement.⁹ In Uganda, the UNHCR-coordinated South Sudan refugee response was assessed as collaborative and inclusive compared with previous emergencies, with effective sectoral coordination in health and WASH and early, participatory, interagency needs assessments informing the response design.¹⁰ A systematic review of coordination structures across 20 major refugee response situations confirms this pattern: first-phase leadership is where UNHCR's coordination performs well, but its effectiveness is conditioned by host government stance and the scale of donor funding managed by UNHCR. These factors shape UNHCR's actual, as distinct from formal, authority to lead.⁴

The cliff appears as soon as the emergency phase ends. In Ukraine, by 2017 the full humanitarian coordination machinery had become over-engineered for the situation's actual stage, with only one cluster closing despite a coordination review recommending most should close the prior year. The closure process was driven by funding cuts rather than deliberate planning, with insufficient guidance on how to hand over essential coordination functions to national partners.⁵ In Ethiopia, UNHCR filled cluster coordination gaps in the absence of other humanitarian actors at national level, but protection coordination at sub-national level remained persistently weaker, with HR gaps and delayed deployments undermining UNHCR's standing in partners' eyes at the moments that mattered most.¹¹ In Bangladesh, the

coordination system for the Rohingya response was assessed as "messy," with accountability shared among multiple agencies in an ad hoc arrangement based loosely on the cluster system. The arrangement worked through goodwill and pragmatism but made it structurally harder for UNHCR to fulfil its protection mandate.¹²

"There is insufficient precedent and guidance on closing down the emergency phase of a displacement emergency ... it takes vision and strength at the level of the HC and the HCT to herd the humanitarian community towards the exit."⁵

2. The Conflict of Interest Between Coordinator, Implementer, and Funder Is Unresolved and Undermines Coordination Credibility

The Protection Cluster is where the conflict of interest operates most visibly. UNHCR is simultaneously the cluster lead, the largest operational actor, and in most settings the largest funder, a triple role that partners notice and that the portfolio documents as structurally unresolved. The result is consistent: clusters are strongest where UNHCR's comparative advantage is sharpest, in operational support and protection advocacy, and weakest precisely where the coordination function matters most: strategic prioritisation and performance monitoring. Across the evaluations, few UNHCR-led clusters had strategies or work plans beyond Humanitarian Response Plan submissions, cluster performance monitoring was rarely undertaken, and accountability to affected populations was consistently identified as the weakest cluster function.¹

Three structural failures recur. First, the dual role of UNHCR as cluster lead and as the largest operational actor creates a conflict of interest that partners notice and that UNHCR has not resolved. In West and Central Africa, shelter cluster coordinators and technical staff were double-hatting, providing IASC cluster coordination functions and managing UNHCR's own shelter programming simultaneously. The evaluation found this dual role contrary to IASC cluster principles; it caused miscommunication with partners about UNHCR's roles and limited the effectiveness of shelter coordination itself.² The Global Protection Cluster evaluation found examples of senior country-level UNHCR staff taking decisions that placed agency interests over those of the cluster, and inconsistent understanding globally of the cluster's neutrality relative to UNHCR's operational agenda.¹

Second, and related, UNHCR's default leadership style in coordination settings has consistently been characterised by partners as directive and hierarchical. A 2019 desk review of UNHCR's leadership and coordination role across 20 contexts found that external stakeholders, especially NGOs, raised the issue of UNHCR's "command and control" leadership style with notable frequency and intensity; partners noted that this stood in contrast to UNHCR's own internal focus on refining coordination structures rather than leadership behaviour. This pattern was first documented internally in a 2010 research paper that noted UNHCR staff had a structural tendency toward vertical behaviour, and that the organisation's internal incentives solicited and rewarded vertical rather than horizontal skills, contrary to the requirements of the cluster approach.^{4,13} The 2019 desk review found these observations remained as relevant a decade later. In Bangladesh, an overly directive leadership style created persistent tensions with the organisation's main partners at exactly the moments when coordination was most critical.^{4,12}

Third, information management capacity is a persistent gap: in Uganda, the absence of a dedicated information management specialist until 2015 contributed to limitations in producing technical, sector-specific and demographic information products; in Sudan, insufficient time

was spent on strategic discussion in coordination meetings.^{10,9} In DRC, OCHA's final L3 report showed the protection sector reaching 8% of targeted people while WASH and shelter showed 103% and 43% respectively. The gap did not reflect an absence of protection from the response: service delivery metrics crowd out protection coverage in operational reporting, and the cluster lacked the resources to follow up on monitoring findings.¹⁴

The positive cases are instructive precisely because they isolate the enabling conditions. In Ukraine, continuity of cluster leadership (despite wider management turbulence) produced strong partner assessments: 63% of protection cluster members and 70% of shelter cluster members rated coordination as done well or very well. The clusters also adapted flexibly to context, activating working groups on Mine Action, Housing Land and Property, and Age and Disability that are frequently overlooked in standard humanitarian responses.⁵ In Mozambique, the Protection Cluster, the Persons with Disability working group, and the Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse working group together enabled strategic advocacy and coordination that contributed to increased protection response even when UNHCR faced challenges ensuring protection was adequately addressed at HCT level.¹⁵

“There remains a high level of confusion in relation to UNHCR's cluster lead agency responsibilities which can compromise the neutrality of the cluster. The evaluation found an inconsistent understanding of this by UNHCR globally and in Country Offices.”¹

3. When the RCM and the Cluster System Must Operate Simultaneously, the Conflict of Interest Becomes a Coordination Crisis

When the RCM and the IASC cluster system must operate simultaneously in the same setting, the structural conflict of interest from Section 2 escalates from a tension into a coordination crisis. The evaluations document this consistently: mandate confusion, inter-agency tension, and legitimacy deficits emerge wherever both frameworks are active, and UNHCR has not developed a settled institutional response to the problem.

△ EVIDENCE BASE NOTE

The findings in this section draw on evaluations conducted prior to the October 2024 revision of the Refugee Coordination Model. The 2024 RCM guidance directly addresses several of the design weaknesses documented here: it introduces a maximalist sample coordination structure to improve context-matching and predictability; it provides expanded guidance on managing the interface between the RCM and the IASC cluster system in mixed settings, including explicit reference to the 2014 UNHCR–OCHA Joint Note on accountability lines between the UNHCR Representative and Humanitarian Coordinator; and it establishes localisation as a core principle with dedicated local platforms to address the perceived UNHCR-centricity of coordination structures. None of these changes has yet been independently evaluated. The structural conflict of interest, with UNHCR simultaneously serving as coordinator, implementer, and funder, is not addressed by the 2024 revision and remains the underlying challenge documented across the evaluation portfolio.

A 2019 desk review mapping coordination structures across 20 major response contexts found no clear typology of refugee coordination arrangements that could be reliably matched to context type: arrangements varied not only across settings but within them over time, meaning that any snapshot of coordination structures reflects a point in time rather than an institutional pattern.⁴

The RCM was designed to ensure predictability in refugee responses across different settings, but the desk review concluded it has not made adequate sense of the complex arenas and dynamics of response that UNHCR must operate within. Fundamentally, the RCM and the Humanitarian Coordinator-led cluster approach do not readily align. Coordination of service delivery is structured differently, and the UNHCR Representative at country level remains

accountable for the refugee response while the Humanitarian Coordinator oversees the entire humanitarian response. No existing guidance resolves the resulting ambiguity over accountability.⁴ In Iraq, the overlap between the OCHA-led cluster system and UNHCR's RCM was characterised by cluster and sector lead roles filled by the same double-hatted individuals, making it difficult for NGOs to discern the boundaries between both coordination systems. In Sudan, the coexistence of the RCM with the IASC cluster system led to inter-agency tensions; the RCM was perceived by some operational partners as UNHCR-centric, with the limited inclusion of local NGOs and government actors negatively impacting its effectiveness.^{3,16}

In West and Central Africa, the evaluation found that the boundaries of UNHCR's role as operational agency and cluster lead agency required clarification in IDP-only and mixed settings, with dual-role confusion limiting the effectiveness of coordination and of UNHCR's partnerships across the region.² In the Sahel, refugee sector coordination was assessed as better established and more effective than IDP cluster coordination mechanisms, with the complexity of mixed-displacement situations compounding coordination challenges where multiple mechanisms were simultaneously active.¹⁷ One tested response to the UNHCR-centricity problem appears in the Sudan response: in Egypt, UNHCR made the strategic choice of inviting UNDP to chair inter-agency and intersectoral working groups, which increased the ownership and responsibility of development actors for the refugee response and reduced the perception that the RCM served UNHCR's interests above those of the collective response.³

“The perception of the RCM as a UNHCR-centric coordination model that benefits UNHCR more than its partners ... combined with the overall limited inclusion of local NGOs and government actors, has negatively impacted its effectiveness.”³

4. At the Humanitarian–Development Nexus, UNHCR’s Convening Power Is Real but Chronically Underactivated

UNHCR's convening role at the humanitarian–development interface is where the evidence shows both the greatest potential and the clearest structural barriers. The CRRF assessment found that across 12 of 15 CRRF countries the approach resulted in the participation of over 71 line ministries and 58 other government partners, creating forums for conversation between UN agencies, donors, governments, and NGOs to achieve collective outcomes for refugees. In Ethiopia and Uganda, CRRF Secretariats facilitated government agencies to work more coherently across line ministries and with multiple humanitarian and development partners.¹⁸ In Colombia, UNHCR's co-chairing of the GIFMM platform worked well because UNHCR did not try to impose a top-down approach but instead created a common convening space where actors could clarify their respective roles and achieve a more coordinated response.¹⁹ In Mauritania, UNHCR played a catalytic coordination role in bringing the refugee-hosting region into World Bank infrastructure projects, positioning development financing to replace humanitarian delivery.²⁰

A 2019 desk review tracking UNHCR's evolving leadership role in the context of the Global Compact on Refugees identified the humanitarian-development nexus as the most significant leadership challenge ahead: UNHCR's GCR-mandated catalytic role requires a more horizontal, facilitative form of leadership than has characterised its coordination practice to date, and the shift demands new skills, such as influencing and mediation, that differ substantially from the more directive management capacities that UNHCR has historically rewarded. The desk review found no institutional vision articulating what this shift requires of

senior staff, and noted that leadership behaviour received little attention in performance appraisals.⁴ This internal systems gap directly constrains the nexus ambition: UNHCR's development coordination role depends on partners voluntarily following its facilitation, which requires the horizontal, trust-based engagement that the organisation's incentive structures were not designed to build.

The structural barrier is consistent across the evaluations: development actors and UNHCR do not share a common paradigm on durable solutions at the country level, and UNHCR's coordination model (built around annual planning cycles, humanitarian response plans, and sectoral cluster structures) is not designed for the long-term, multi-actor coordination that nexus work requires. In Somalia, the Triple Nexus approach remained underutilised due to siloed donor funding, fragmented partnerships, and a continued reliance on project-based financing that constrained the practical realisation of humanitarian–development–peace linkages.²¹ In the Southern Africa livelihoods strategy, the absence of formal continuous coordination mechanisms with national ministries, with engagement occurring only during project implementation cycles, meant that even effective initiatives seldom translated into structural change.²²

Where the nexus model has worked, as in Mauritania, Colombia, and CAR, the distinguishing feature is that UNHCR invested in the convening relationship before a crisis required it, creating the institutional trust that made joint planning possible when it mattered. In repatriation contexts, UNHCR coordination is widely recognised as effective for time-bound tasks with clear divisions of labour and well-defined objectives: coordination of tripartite agreements, identity verification, civil documentation. In the more complex area of reintegration, UNHCR must contend with competing claims for sector leadership, divergent conceptions of the task, and limited donor appetite for long-term programmes.^{19,20}

“UNHCR [is] called upon to act as the leader that employs an authoritative style in securing refugee rights, but also as an influencer and catalyst when supporting other actors to deliver on behalf of the collective. UNHCR's current systems reward Representatives for what they have done for the organization.”⁴

5. Coordination Has Substituted for National Ownership Rather Than Building It

Coordination handover is the most consistently under-resourced function in UNHCR's coordination work. The 2017 Ukraine evaluation identified the problem directly: there is insufficient guidance on closing down emergency coordination phases, IASC guidelines are vague, and in situations where the self-interest of humanitarian agencies is to maintain a humanitarian management model for as long as funding allows, it takes vision and strength at the level of the HC and the HCT to move the humanitarian community toward the exit.⁵ Seven years later, the 2024 Ukraine L3 evaluation found the clusters remained, with few exceptions, largely led by agencies belonging to the international humanitarian system, with significant work still needed to articulate a transition plan placing humanitarian coordination under national leadership, and a clear plan and collective action described as urgently required.⁶ In Mozambique, the expanded IDP response included no exit plan and no plan to reduce emergency coordination structures as needs evolved. The continued need to respond to cyclical emergencies compounded this gap.¹⁵

In IDP settings, the 2024 IDP Evaluation found that Country Offices struggled to apply responsible disengagement commitments in practical ways, particularly during cluster

deactivation, lacking clear criteria for when to engage and when to stop, and insufficient guidance on how to reinforce government responsibilities in internal displacement situations.⁷ The CRRF assessment identified institutionalisation of relationships as essential, and staff rotation and turnover in humanitarian, development, and government agencies as the primary mechanism disrupting continuity. Across the CRRF countries, strategies with specific commitments and detailed analysis, such as the Uganda and Ethiopia CRRF Roadmaps, showed the value of longer-term planning and clear stakeholder expectations, because the individuals who built the relationships cannot be assumed to stay.¹⁸ In the Philippines, inconsistent reporting and lack of institutional memory hindered long-term impact assessment and local ownership, particularly at the sub-national level where local officials lacked the capacity to sustain coordination structures after UNHCR's exit.²³

A 2019 desk review on UNHCR's leadership and coordination role concluded that the answer to the handover problem is not more coordination structures or more detailed guidance on when to exit, but investment in leadership. The review suggested that UNHCR develop a theory of change for each country situation: not to pre-define coordination structures but to ensure that UNHCR has a clear strategy in place for what it expects to achieve in leading and engaging in coordination platforms, who will lead coordination after UNHCR steps back, and what the transition will require. The review found that UNHCR places great emphasis on coordination arrangements while consistently not addressing the underlying leadership behaviour that makes those arrangements work, and that until its internal systems reward Representatives for leading and undertaking coordination on behalf of the collective, the transition problem will not be resolved.⁴

The positive cases share a clear architecture. In Chad, the coordination of refugee education is furthest into the national system of any context in the evaluations: a dedicated Ministry focal point, a National Refugee Education Strategy to 2030, and UNHCR positioned as a technical and convening partner within a government-led structure rather than running a parallel humanitarian mechanism.²⁴ In Colombia and CAR, UNHCR achieved sustainability gains by approaching refugee and IDP returns through shared coordination arrangements, with the CAR Working Group on Durable Solutions co-chaired with UNDP and serving both caseloads under the same Solutions programming. The model required the intervention of the Resident Coordinator to resolve initial definitional differences but was subsequently regarded as constructive by all partners.¹⁹

“Prior to the full-scale invasion, some clusters were transitioning and/or phasing out. However, two years on, while there are examples of cluster engagement with government documented in this report, the clusters remain — with a few exceptions — largely led by agencies that belong to the international humanitarian system.”⁶

6. Conclusion

Where UNHCR's coordination mandate is clear, its coordination is effective. Where that clarity erodes, so does performance. The mechanism is a structural conflict of interest that UNHCR has not resolved: it cannot be a neutral coordinator when it is also a major operational actor and funder in the same space. In mixed settings where both coordination frameworks coexist, that conflict intensifies, producing mandate confusion, inter-agency tension, and questions about whose interests the RCM serves that no guidance document has resolved. At the humanitarian–development nexus, UNHCR's convening power is real and documented, but it depends on sustained relational investment and horizontal leadership behaviours that

UNHCR's performance systems do not recognise or develop. The pattern across all four is the same: coordination built around UNHCR leadership has not built the national ownership that would outlast it, because transition was planned too late, under-resourced, and structured around UNHCR's exit rather than national actors' entry. The positive models documented here share one feature: UNHCR defined from the outset what it was building toward and who would lead after it stepped back. UNHCR's next Strategic Directions depend on a catalytic coordination model. The positive cases in this paper are not outliers. They are the template for that direction.

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's Leadership of the Global Protection Cluster and Field Protection Clusters](#) (2017), p. 67.
2. [West and Central Africa Regional Shelter and Settlement Evaluation](#) (2022), p. 11.
3. [Evaluation of UNHCR's Multi-country L3 Emergency Response to the Sudan Situation \(Sudan, Chad, Egypt and South Sudan\)](#) (2025), p. 81.
4. [UNHCR's Leadership and Coordination Role in Refugee Response Settings](#) (2019), p. 34.
5. [Evaluation of UNHCR's Ukraine Country Programme](#) (2017), pp. 75, 84.
6. [Evaluation of UNHCR's L3 Response in Ukraine](#) (2024), p. 76.
7. [Evaluation of UNHCR's Engagement in Situations of Internal Displacement](#) (2024), p. 11.
8. [Evaluation of UNHCR's Level 3 Regional Refugee Emergency Response to the Crisis from Ukraine](#) (2023), p. 65.
9. [Evaluation of UNHCR's Multi-country L3 Emergency Response to the Sudan Situation \(Sudan, Chad, Egypt and South Sudan\)](#) (2025), p. 14.
10. [Evaluation of UNHCR's Response to the L3 South Sudan Refugee Crisis in Uganda and Ethiopia](#) (2015), p. 12.
11. [Evaluation of UNHCR's Response to the L3 Ethiopia](#) (2023), p. 14.
12. [Independent Evaluation of UNHCR's Emergency Response to the Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh](#) (2018), p. 87.
13. [Evaluation of UNHCR's Leadership and Coordination Role in Refugee Response Settings](#) (2019), p. 34.
14. [Independent Evaluation of UNHCR's Response to the L3 Emergency in the Democratic Republic of the Congo](#) (2018), p. 10.
15. [Country Strategy Evaluation Mozambique](#) (2023), p. 16.
16. [UNHCR Country Portfolio Evaluation: Iraq](#) (2020), p. 50.
17. [UNHCR's Response to Multiple Emergencies in the Central Sahel Region](#) (2022), p. 12.
18. [Two Year Progress Assessment of the CRRF Approach September 2016–September 2018](#) (2018), p. 61.
19. [Repatriation Programmes and Activities](#) (2022), p. 8.
20. [Country Strategy Evaluation Mauritania](#) (2023), p. 16.
21. [Country Strategy Evaluation Somalia](#) (2025), p. 69.
22. [Evaluation of the Implementation of UNHCR's Southern Africa Regional Stepped Up Livelihoods and Economic Inclusion Strategy](#) (2025), p. 16.
23. [Evaluation of the Protection and Solutions Programme for Internally Displaced Persons in Mindanao](#) (2025), p. 49.
24. [Longitudinal Evaluation of UNHCR's Age, Gender and Diversity \(AGD\) Policy: Final Report](#) (2023), p. 69.