

UNHCR AS OPERATIONAL ACTOR

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 20 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 assistance and operational delivery through a systems-level lens, asking whether delivery designed for the emergency phase transitions to national systems or persists in parallel. Part of this evidence also appears in the paper on Emergency Response, which asks whether people obtain protection at onset.

In brief. UNHCR delivers assistance well in the emergency phase but carries that direct-delivery model into protracted situations, where it runs in parallel to national systems rather than connecting people to them. The first-phase response is a clear strength: fast mobilisation, funding at volume, coordination across large partner networks. Beyond it, the quality of what reaches people turns on how UNHCR manages the partners who deliver on its behalf, where the evaluations identify recurring shortcomings. Cash meets basic needs effectively, but long-term provision builds neither independence nor durable outcomes, and livelihoods is better delivered through development and national actors rather than through UNHCR's own programming. The clearest gap is transition: in protracted situations UNHCR plans handover to national systems late or not at all, producing parallel structures that neither serve forcibly displaced and stateless persons nor build the national capacity that would outlast its presence. Where UNHCR designed transition from the outset, the approach worked.

1. UNHCR's Emergency Surge Is a Clear Strength; the Enabling Functions That Sustain It Are Not

UNHCR can mobilise quickly, resource at volume, and establish coordination across large partner networks. The Ukraine regional response organised a \$1.8 billion plan with more than 140 partners across five countries within weeks; the Sudan response established credible leadership with more than 80 operational partners in a compressed timeframe.^{1,2} These are institutional strengths.

The enabling functions that should sustain that capability are weak, and the scale of an emergency exacerbates that weakness. In northern Ethiopia, the L3 response struggled to deploy the right people at the right time, leaving insufficient cluster coordination capacity at sub-national level and undermining UNHCR's leadership in the eyes of stakeholders.³ In the Ukraine regional response, the evaluation identified vulnerabilities in how UNHCR deploys and guides emergency staff: rosters were depleted in support functions and middle management, and staff defaulted to parallel mechanisms rather than working through national systems.¹ Partner management was no more reliable: in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the non-renewal of one partnership agreement in Kasai left UNHCR unable to identify a replacement in time, disrupting an entire sub-operation.⁴ Monitoring was weaker still: the same evaluation found that outcome monitoring was not integral to UNHCR's systems at either country or headquarters level, except in cash-based interventions, leaving the organisation without evidence of what its delivery achieved.⁴

“These structural gaps are the result of institutional impediments due to the imbalance between operational requirements of UNHCR, competing priorities and availability of relevant staff... impacting on the timing of deployment of specialist staff not only to Ukraine but elsewhere in the world as well.”⁵

IDP operations expose this sharply. UNHCR's protection-oriented staffing profile is poorly matched to assistance-heavy IDP emergencies. The Ukraine 2017 evaluation found that the shift to an IDP response placed demands on the Kyiv office for which it was not configured; the 2024 IDP engagement review found Country Offices committed to IDP policy but unable to apply it in practice.^{5,6} Where direct access is cut, community-based protection monitoring is the delivery model that endures: in northern Ethiopia, protection help desks and trained community monitors maintained coverage when humanitarian access was severed.³

2. Weak Partner Management Limits What UNHCR's Assistance Can Achieve

UNHCR delivers most of its assistance through funded partners. Among the factors that determine delivery quality, partner management is the one UNHCR most directly controls, and the evaluation record finds it weak across very different operations: in how partners are selected, how their work is monitored, and how their capacity is strengthened.

“UNHCR's management processes, including Project Partnership Agreements, partner oversight, coordination and human resources procedures, are characterised by administrative complexity that appears misaligned with the dynamic and unpredictable nature of its operational environment.”⁷

When partner selection is constrained or poorly handled, the consequences fall directly on delivery. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, partner selection processes had unintended negative consequences: when one partnership agreement in Kasai was not renewed, UNHCR could not identify a replacement in time, and an entire sub-operation was disrupted.⁴ In the Sudan, government restrictions limited which organisations UNHCR could engage during the initial phase of the response, and the evaluation found that the available partnership options were too narrow to fill critical gaps efficiently.⁸

Monitoring records what partners do rather than what their work achieves. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, outcome monitoring was not integral to UNHCR's systems at either country or headquarters level, except in cash-based interventions.⁴ In Somalia, UNHCR's investment in monitoring is extensive, but the evaluation found that it does not provide reliable information on whether intended changes are occurring, and that a target-driven approach focuses attention on numbers rather than quality.⁷ Monitoring of this kind records that assistance was delivered, not whether it changed anything for the people who received it.

UNHCR builds partner capacity well in some operations; in others the investment is partial, and delivery suffers where partners are left under-supported. The protection transfer evaluation found that developing partner capacity took more time than expected and that partners needed technical and financial support that was not consistently provided.⁹ Where that investment is not made and UNHCR delivers directly instead, quality can suffer: the DAFI

evaluation found that direct implementation produced less tailored and less consistent support to students than local funded partners had provided.¹⁰

Where UNHCR invests in partner management from the start, the difference shows. The Peru evaluation found that collaborative engagement from the outset, including continuous programme support, joint monitoring, and audits, strengthened partner capacity and reached quality standards that lighter oversight does not.¹¹

3. Cash Meets Basic Needs Well; Providing it Long-Term Is Neither Effective Nor UNHCR's Role

Cash is among the strongest tools in UNHCR's delivery record. In the Ukraine regional response, UNHCR established an operational cash hub within weeks and multipurpose cash became the most effective pillar of the response.¹ In Greece, multipurpose grants allowed people to meet their basic needs, and the evaluation found the design appropriate to the context.¹² Cash works when it is contextualised: in Mauritania, cash distribution was paired with gas-distributor partnerships so families could buy cooking kits and cylinders, matching the modality to how people met their needs.¹³

Meeting basic needs is not the same as building independence, and the record is clear that cash alone does not close that gap. In Rwanda, refugees used cash to meet basic needs with positive protection effects, but the transfer was too small to do more and dependence persisted.¹⁴ In Greece, people remained reliant on cash for basic needs despite having the right to work.¹²

The lesson the evaluations draw is not that UNHCR should fund livelihoods programmes more deeply. The Livelihoods evaluation concluded that UNHCR is not the actor best positioned to build the economic capacity of individuals and households, and should coordinate with partners who work at scale on economic inclusion.¹⁵ Later evaluations reach the same conclusion: UNHCR's contribution to durable livelihoods lies in convening and technical leadership, not direct implementation.¹⁶

4. Handover to National Systems Is Planned Late or Not at All

In protracted situations, UNHCR often delivers in parallel to national systems and treats handover as an eventual exit rather than a decision built into delivery from the start. In West and Central Africa, UNHCR acts as the provider of last resort for shelter, constructing planned camps but holding no strategy for how those settlements transfer or connect to national provision as displacement becomes protracted.¹⁷ In Kenya, UNHCR runs more than 100 refugee schools as a parallel system in management and financing, aligned with the national curriculum and examinations in the hope of eventual integration, but with no mechanism to bring that integration about.¹⁸ Alignment with national standards is not the same as a route into national systems.

The phase-down across Angola, Botswana, and Namibia was driven by the goal of reducing expenditure, but the evaluation found the underlying assumptions were never transparently tested, governments were not engaged early enough to take on responsibility, and the criteria for handover were absent. Relations with governments were strained, protection responsibilities went unmet, and the evaluation concluded that ending a presence is not in

itself a cost-saving measure: done properly, phasing out requires the same concentrated resourcing and high-level engagement as phasing up.¹⁹

“Service transfer is a gradual process, necessitating multi-year planning. It should be carried out progressively to ensure consolidation and ownership at each step and should be closely monitored.”¹³

The positive cases share one feature: UNHCR defined from the start what it was building toward and who would sustain it. In Tajikistan, cooperation with the government through the status determination process secured refugees full access to national health and education services rather than UNHCR-run alternatives.²⁰ In Mauritania, UNHCR played a catalytic role in bringing the Mbera refugee region into World Bank projects for health, electrification, and water infrastructure, so that development financing took the place of humanitarian provision.¹³ In Chad, the integration of refugee services into the national system is furthest advanced in education, where a national focal point for refugee education sits within the ministry and UNHCR works as a technical and advocacy partner rather than a provider.¹⁸

5. Conclusion

UNHCR delivers assistance most effectively in the emergency phase, where speed, scale, and coordination are its established strengths. The evidence does not show those strengths fading so much as continuing past the point where direct delivery serves people best: as a response moves into a protracted situation, the model that saved lives at the outset becomes a parallel structure running alongside national systems rather than connecting people to them. Two findings explain most of this. Delivery quality depends less on what UNHCR provides directly than on how it manages the partners who deliver for it, and that management falls short across operations. Transition to national systems is treated as an exit rather than a decision built into delivery, so operations are left running structures they cannot transfer.

Neither pattern is inevitable. Where UNHCR defined from the outset what it was building toward and who would sustain it, refugees gained access to national systems rather than to UNHCR-run alternatives. Operational delivery is most valuable when it is bounded, designed for handover, and used to draw in the actors who will remain. UNHCR should reserve direct delivery for the emergency phase and the contexts where no other actor can provide, and treat every operation beyond that as a transition planned from the start.

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 Level 3 Regional Refugee Emergency Response to the crisis in Ukraine](#) (2023), p. 68.
2. [Evaluation of UNHCR's Multi-country L3 Emergency Response to the Sudan Situation \(Sudan, Chad, Egypt and South Sudan\)](#) (2025), p. 14.
3. [Evaluation of UNHCR's Response to the L3 Ethiopia](#) (2023), p. 56.
4. [Independent Evaluation of UNHCR's Response to the L3 Emergency in the Democratic Republic of Congo](#) (2018), p. 47.
5. [Evaluation of UNHCR's Ukraine Country Programme](#) (2017), p. 76.
6. [Evaluation of UNHCR's Engagement in Situations of Internal Displacement](#) (2024), p. 11.
7. [Country Strategy Evaluation Somalia](#) (2025), p. 71.
8. [Independent Evaluation of the UNHCR South Sudanese Refugee Response in White Nile State, Sudan](#) (2018), p. 68.
9. [Evaluation of effectiveness of the Protection Transfer Arrangement in Central America](#) (2018), p. 25.
10. [Tertiary Education Scholarship Programme \(DAFI\)](#) (2022), p. 56.
11. [Country Strategy Evaluation Peru](#) (2024), p. 91.
12. [Evaluation of the effects of cash based interventions on protection outcomes in Greece](#) (2018), p. 13.

13. [Country Strategy Evaluation Mauritania](#) (2023), pp. 87, 88, 89.
14. [Evaluation of the effects of UNHCR cash-based interventions on protection outcomes in Rwanda](#) (2020), p. 67.
15. [Evaluation of UNHCR's Livelihoods Strategies and Approaches](#) (2018), p. 61.
16. [Evaluation of the Implementation of UNHCR's Southern Africa Regional Stepped Up Livelihoods and Economic Inclusion Strategy](#) (2025), p. 72.
17. [West and Central Africa Regional Shelter and Settlement Evaluation](#) (2022), pp. 82, 85.
18. [Longitudinal evaluation of UNHCR's Age, gender and diversity \(AGD\) policy: Final report](#) (2023), pp. 74, 79.
19. [Evaluation of UNHCR's country operations in Angola, Botswana and Namibia: Assessment of phasing down UNHCR presence](#) (2018), p. 18.
20. [Country Strategy Evaluation Tajikistan](#) (2024), p. 76.