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Consideration of reports relating to programme
and administrative oversight and evaluation

Report on evaluation

Report of the High Commissioner

Summary

This report, covering the period from July 2020 to June 2021, is provided pursuant to the decision of the Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme to consider reports relating to programme and administrative oversight and evaluation during its annual plenary session (A/AC.96/1003, para. 25(1)(f)(vi)).

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Contents

I.   Introduction

1.   Over the past year, the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic presented a range of unique and practical obstacles to UNHCR's usual evaluation practices. As a result, it focused on work that could be undertaken from Headquarters in order to lighten the evaluation footprint on overwhelmed operations and avoid additional pressures on persons of concern to UNHCR with respect to data collection. This work included: finalizing evaluation guidance; providing substantive contributions for training on UNHCR's new results-based management system, COMPASS; preparing evaluation synthesis briefs and terms of reference for 2021 evaluations; and recruiting new regional evaluation staff. Evaluations that could not be postponed were carried out using remote-based approaches and employing national experts, where feasible and safe to do so.

2.   Despite constraining factors, UNHCR was able to complete 13 independent evaluative exercises (see annex I) and initiated another 27. These ranged from operationally specific to globally thematic, each aligned with the organization's strategic priority areas. In addition, a strategic approach paper was developed for the evaluation of UNHCR's COVID-19 response. Associated with this effort, UNHCR engaged with partners of the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) to evaluate the global COVID-19 response for refugees.

3.   A United Nations-DAC peer review of UNHCR's evaluation function[1] is currently being finalized. This review looks at the function against the three core principles of independence, credibility and utility and, by extension, assesses the confidence that should be placed in the evaluations produced by the organization. The approach aims to build greater knowledge and use of the evaluation system by management, governing bodies and others, and to instil confidence in it. It seeks to promote a suitable way of "evaluating the evaluators" and sharing good practices, experience and mutual learning.

4.   This report provides an update on progress towards achieving the four objectives set out in its evaluation strategy, namely: (i) increasing evaluation coverage and quality; (ii) building capacity to undertake and use evaluations; (iii) strengthening an evaluation function that is linked to other complementary functions, such as oversight, strategic planning, monitoring, data and analytics, and results-based management; and (iv) improving the relevance and utilization of evaluation findings. The report also contains reflections on the findings and lessons learned from key evaluations over the past year.

II.   Highlights of select evaluations

Cyclone Idai response

5.   The evaluation of UNHCR's emergency response to Cyclone Idai in Malawi, Mozambique and Zimbabwe concluded that while UNHCR played a critical role in coordinating and leading protection efforts, there were critical policy implementation gaps concerning the organization's engagement in climate-related disaster displacement in non-conflict situations. The study highlighted that the need for better policy coherence to guide UNHCR's response to disasters was catalytic in prompting management action with regard to disaster preparedness and planning; and identified lessons that could be extrapolated to other responses to disasters.[2] It will provide valuable inputs with respect to the roll-out of UNHCR's "Strategic framework for climate action".

Workforce learning and development

6.   The evaluation of UNHCR's workforce learning and development advocated a transformation of the approach to make it more "fit for the future". The study found that learning had not been seen as a strategic priority in UNHCR and that informal learning "in

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[1]   See https://www.oecd.org/dac/evaluation/evaluatingmultilateraleffectiveness.htm.

[2]   During the first half of 2021, UNHCR responded to two new disasters: volcano-induced displacement in the eastern part of the Democratic Republic of the Congo and explosions which affected refugees and their host communities in Beirut, Lebanon.

the flow of work" is far from embedded in the organization. The study recognizes areas where UNHCR is a leader in learning and development, while offering important opportunities to rethink, modernize and introduce new practices aimed at enhancing the role of organizational learning which meets the needs. Grasping such opportunities will enable UNHCR to better serve its workforce, partners and, ultimately, the people under its care.

Independent review of individual donor assessments in humanitarian operations

7.   The "grand bargain", among other things, committed donor signatories at the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit to reducing individual donor assessments. An independent review of progress found that: (i) the volume of donor assessments had more than doubled since 2016; (ii) joint donor assessments remained the exception and were unlikely to increase; (iii) donor assessments increased administrative costs, but also offered opportunities for learning and change; and (iv) the secondary effects of donor assessments on downstream partners were largely untraceable, though non-governmental organizations operating as downstream partners reported increasing volumes of assessments from their partners in the United Nations and perceived these assessments as more extensive than necessary.

UNHCR-led initiatives to end statelessness

8.   The evaluation of UNHCR-led initiatives to end statelessness indicated that the "Global action plan to end statelessness: 2014-2024" has been a useful framework for guiding States, UNHCR and partners. However, it found that the ambitions of the #IBelong Campaign and targets set were unlikely to be achieved by 2024. According to the evaluation, while UNHCR has been particularly successful in implementing initiatives to address the legal and administrative causes of statelessness, other key drivers of statelessness, including political, social and economic aspects, still need to be addressed. Gaps in reliable data on stateless persons and the effect that statelessness has on their lives have made it more difficult to communicate and prompt action. Internal leadership on statelessness has been crucial to successes so far, with UNHCR Representatives playing the most critical role of all. However, UNHCR statelessness budgets have not kept pace with its ambitions, and the evaluation advocates that additional, sustained funding (and fundraising) is required. Equally crucial is investment in UNHCR´s workforce, to build knowledge and skills, with more dedicated staff and communications capacity around issues of statelessness. Finally, the evaluation noted that, while UNHCR had successfully mobilized a wide range of stakeholders at different levels during the campaign, further efforts were needed to bring international, regional and national actors together as a true coalition to collectively mobilize for change, including harnessing the contributions of stateless persons themselves.

UNHCR's regional refugee response to the Venezuela situation

9.   This evaluation found that UNHCR's assistance and protection strategies in the wake of mass displacement have been, in general, highly relevant and effective. While conditions and achievements vary across Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador and Peru, the focus on support to the most vulnerable, assistance through helplines and cash-based interventions, strengthening of asylum systems and mobilization of support networks have produced a relevant and effective response. Sustainability, however, remains a challenge, even while the COVID-19 pandemic has necessitated a reversion to emergency assistance. Overall, the evaluation established that UNHCR had successfully advocated the inclusion of refugees and migrants in public health response plans and emergency aid during the COVID-19 pandemic. Remaining challenges include further strengthening of the co-leadership model for coordinating responses to mixed population flows, data-sharing and communication externally and internally.

Cash-based interventions in Rwanda

10.   There is growing interest in understanding the contribution of cash-based interventions as an effective means of delivering assistance and achieving protection outcomes in different contexts. The evaluation – which follows similar studies in Greece and Jordan – found that, overall, cash-based interventions had been well-adapted and appropriate as a programming modality in Rwanda. They performed well in terms of design, but

targeting, communications, feedback mechanisms and complaints handling could be improved. Similar to findings from other evaluations, transfer amounts per household were deemed to be too small to fully address protection risks. The evaluation suggests that a more targeted approach, with more benefit to fewer but more vulnerable households, could further improve protection outcomes – particularly for higher levels of vulnerability, such as large families and people with disabilities.

Telling the real story 2.0

11.   "Telling the real story" (TRS) is an innovative UNHCR global project that focuses on refugees and others at risk of irregular movement. Populations reached through the TRS project include Nigerians and Somalis living in their home countries, and Eritreans and Somalis living in camp situations in Ethiopia and the Sudan. The evaluation found the TRS approach to be relevant, appropriate, effective and efficient, delivering on expected results in sharing trusted and valued information with persons of concern. It demonstrated not only that information requires compelling ways to reach its target audience, but also that persons of concern often think they have more accurate information than they do. This means that traditional and more passive approaches to communicating with communities and information-sharing may not be very effective because people do not seek out what they think they already know. The TRS project has excelled at creating tailored information solutions and, while this may not be realistic for many contexts in which UNHCR operates, this approach to generating content may be highly useful for UNHCR more broadly. The evaluation recommended that the TRS project team develop a set of toolboxes that enable and support project processes, and urged UNHCR to explore opportunities to use the expertise available through the TRS project in its wider efforts to improve accountability to affected people.

Egypt country strategy 2016-2020

12.   The evaluation found that UNHCR was widely credited with contributing to the national asylum law, potentially a seminal achievement. Excellent relations with the Government of Egypt were a key ingredient to this success. UNHCR holds a unique role in protection actions and has achieved significant successes with comparatively limited funding in Egypt. However, there are other actors who can – and should – provide essential services to meet the basic needs and increase investments, so that more of UNHCR's budget can be allocated to the protection services that no other entity can provide. The evaluation recommended that UNHCR's Representation in Egypt consider ways to enhance its collaboration with the Government, while ensuring that the organization: maintains its protection authority, including to safeguard the rights of refugees; develops an approach that is more catalytic to encourage greater burden-sharing with other partners; and, reviews and revises its approach to communicating with communities.

UNHCR's engagement in humanitarian-development cooperation

13.   A longitudinal evaluation on UNHCR's engagement in humanitarian-development cooperation launched in 2018 aimed to help the organization better position itself and approach its cooperation with development partners and host governments to support refugee self-reliance and inclusion. The evaluation found that UNHCR had implemented a number of relevant and effective institutional measures to support the inclusion agenda, including creating institutional units and staff positions to drive engagement with development actors. Four discussion papers published late in 2020 focused on closing policy-related operational gaps; enhancing planning and budgeting processes that support the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR); strengthening UNHCR's engagement on systems-building for protection; and garnering further opportunities for strengthening bilateral and United Nations development system partnerships towards the inclusion of refugees. The final evaluation report will be available in the third quarter of 2021.

COVID-19 innovations

14.   Recent evaluations and studies have demonstrated the value of a number of innovations in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, including the scale-up of hotlines and

WhatsApp Chatbots to deliver key messages to persons of concern in Latin America and the online asylum system in Peru, which has allowed for the continuity of asylum procedures even with strict quarantine measures in place. On the other hand, challenges have also been revealed. In Egypt, some protection activities, including refugee status determination, suffered because of the enforced suspension of many in-person services. In Nigeria, the COVID-19 pandemic pushed the operation back into emergency mode. UNHCR will continue to collect evidence of COVID-19-related impacts and the results of UNHCR responses over the coming year.

15.   UNHCR periodically conducts synthesis exercises to distil key recurrent findings and lessons that emerge from evaluations. Its 2020-2021 analysis identified several broad cross-cutting themes that could benefit from further reflection and deeper analysis through future evaluations: (i) the impact of regionalization and decentralization; (ii) serving persons of concern beyond refugees and stateless persons; (iii) operationalizing the GCR and how UNHCR's roles are adapting in different contexts; (iv) UNHCR's engagement with the United Nations development system at different levels; (v) UNHCR's response to the COVID-19 pandemic; and (vi) UNHCR planning, budgeting and resource mobilization approaches. A number of these issues will be addressed, directly and indirectly, in the evaluation programme of 2022-2023 (see annex II for ongoing and 2022 activities), and findings and lessons from these will be shared publicly when available.

III.   Evaluation coverage and quality

16.   The quality and quantity of UNHCR's evaluations continue to improve and increase. The number of evaluations has grown steadily since UNHCR's evaluation policy was approved in 2016, with only two centralized and two decentralized evaluations produced that year.   The evaluation workplan for 2021 includes 37 evaluations (15 centralized, 5 inter-agency and 17 decentralized evaluations).

17.   An external facility reviewed and assessed the internal UNHCR evaluations completed in 2020 and gave a quality rating of 72 per cent, compared to 58 per cent in 2018-2019. The new independent quality assurance system now in place is being used by evaluation managers at headquarters and field levels to ensure compliance with international evaluation norms and standards.

18.   As part of the roll-out of multi-year strategic planning, a relatively new type of evaluation has been added to management decision-making tools: the country strategy evaluation. These evaluations take a holistic look at UNHCR's results at the country level and examine issues such as partnerships, comparative advantage and the mix of tactics used to achieve results. There has been a significant increase in the demand for this type of evaluation, and one to two per region are expected to be undertaken per year.

19.   Looking forward, and more generally, UNHCR sees a significant growth in demand for, and coverage of, evaluations commissioned at the regional and country level, stimulated by regionalization and decentralization and the multi-year planning roll-out. Evaluation capacity is being strengthened with three outposted regional evaluation staff in Dakar, Nairobi and Panama City, while the remaining four regions are covered from headquarters.

IV.   Capacity-building

20.   UNHCR is committed to strengthening internal capacity to commission and use evaluations to improve the organization's work. Since its last report to the seventy-first session of the Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme (A/AC.96/1205) , UNHCR finalized step-by-step guidance for the conduct of decentralized evaluations and established two new posts in the Regional Bureaux for East and Horn of Africa and the Great Lakes and for West and Central Africa. These regional positions are well-embedded and will focus on fostering and supporting the development of country and regional evaluation plans, based on identified needs for learning and strategic planning inputs.

21.   Regional budgets for evaluation linked to regional evaluation plans have been prepared through a cost-sharing arrangement between the regional bureaux and the Evaluation Service, with a view to stimulating evaluation demand and ensuring that evaluation contributes to robust management in the context of devolved decision-making and multi-year planning.

22.   UNHCR's Evaluation Service and Global Learning and Development Centre are working together to bring in expertise to help craft a targeted evaluation capacity-building programme. Such a programme will define needed capacities at the institutional, organizational and individual level, with the latter involving not only training but other learning approaches based on communities of practice and mentoring models.

V.   Linkages: evaluation, results-based management and oversight

23.   During the 2020-2021 roll-out of the new results-based management (RBM) system, COMPASS, the Evaluation Service provided continuous support, including: assisting with resource persons for training as part of multi-functional teams; contributing to strategy development; reviewing RBM guidance; supporting the development of regional and country-level monitoring and evaluation plans; and responding to questions from operational colleagues.

24.   Efforts are underway with the Evaluation Service and the Inspector-General's Office to coordinate audit and evaluation activities, with the view to: a) providing a holistic view on organizational performance from the activity level to results for persons of concern, and b) optimizing coverage while paying attention to the footprint such activities have on operations.

25.   To improve UNHCR's positioning and results in the broader ecosystem of humanitarian partners, the organization has engaged in several inter-agency and system-wide evaluations, including: a joint evaluation of inclusion for refugee children with the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), an evaluation of the overall humanitarian response in Yemen (led by the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs) and a global inter-agency evaluation that examined the collective performance of humanitarian actors in addressing gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls. UNHCR is Vice-Chair of the United Nations Evaluation Group, and is co-managing two major system-wide evaluations of the COVID-19 global humanitarian response plan and the refugee protection response to COVID-19.

VI.   Relevance and utilization

26.   Evaluations become relevant when they focus on topics that resonate with users' interests; when the findings are communicated effectively and in a timely manner; and when the results prompt conversations and new thinking among the target audience. UNHCR has made progress on all aspects this past year.

27.   Evaluative work is informing UNHCR's thinking and programming including:

   • a new climate framework and regional action plans (informed by lessons from the evaluation of UNHCR's 2019-2020 Cyclone Idai response in southern Africa);

   • major shifts in how the organization delivers on learning beyond training (informed by the evaluation of workforce learning and development);

   • new organizational emphasis on UNHCR's mandate for statelessness (underpinned by the evaluation of UNHCR's efforts to end statelessness); and,

   • operational scale-up in northern Ethiopia following the recent emergency declaration (informed by the internal real-time review).

28.   A comprehensive communications strategy has been developed and is being rolled out. UNHCR has always sought to conduct evaluations in a highly participatory way, and

this is being complemented by new approaches to reach new audiences and to socialize evaluation findings using short briefs, videos, infographics and interactive web-based evaluation content. A good example of these new approaches is reflected in UNHCR's 2020 annual report on evaluation.

29.   UNHCR is committed to the timely uptake and use of evaluation recommendations and is pursuing three specific actions to support this. First, it is expanding the use of strategic workshops that focus specifically on fine-tuning recommendations to ensure that they are useful and actionable. Second, UNHCR is introducing a "light touch" follow-up system designed to quantitatively track the timeliness of submission and implementation of the evaluation management responses. Third, greater efforts are being made by UNHCR to capture qualitatively the impact of recommendations on decision-making. These are often hard to capture but important, and can be illustrated by a quote from a recent strategic workshop held to discuss the humanitarian-development nexus evaluation: *"Even when we are already doing certain things, evaluation is really helpful in continuing to push for the cultural changes and common consensus that we need to keep working on and improving as an institution."*

Annex I

Overview of completed evaluations, July 2020 - June 2021[3]

Evaluations	Countries concerned
Centralized	
1. UNHCR country operation Afghanistan	Afghanistan
2. UNHCR country operation Iraq	Iraq
3. UNHCR country evaluations: Afghanistan, Angola, Iraq, Morocco - synthesis report	Afghanistan, Angola, Iraq, Morocco
4. UNHCR country operation Egypt	Egypt
5. UNHCR's engagement in humanitarian-development cooperation: 4 discussion papers	Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Jordan, the Niger
6. UNHCR's approaches to learning and development for workforce and partners	
7. UNHCR's multi-country refugee response to the Venezuela situation	Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Panama, Peru
8. UNHCR's emergency response to Cyclone Idai	Malawi, Mozambique, Zimbabwe
9. UNHCR-led initiatives to end statelessness	
Decentralized	
10. UNHCR's livelihood programmes: evaluation synthesis summary and report	Djibouti, Malaysia, Mauritania, Senegal, South Sudan
11. The effects of UNHCR cash-based interventions on protection outcomes in Rwanda	Rwanda
12. UNHCR's innovation fund	
13. Independent review of individual donor assessments in humanitarian operations	Afghanistan, Uganda, Yemen
14. "Telling the real story" project 2.0	Eritrea, Ethiopia, Nigeria, Somalia, the Sudan

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[3] All evaluations and management responses are published and can be accessed from https://www.unhcr.org/evaluation-and-research.html.

Annex II

Overview of ongoing and planned evaluations, July 2021 - June 2022

Evaluations	Countries concerned
Centralized	
1. UNHCR's country strategy in Zambia	Zambia
2. UNHCR's country strategy in Mexico	Mexico
3. UNHCR's country strategy in the Sudan	The Sudan
4. UNHCR's multi-country strategy in the Baltic and Nordic countries	Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Iceland, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, Sweden
5. UNHCR's emergency response for internally displaced persons in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo	Democratic Republic of the Congo
6. UNHCR's emergency response in Burkina Faso, the Niger and Mali (Sahel multi-country evaluation)	Burkina Faso, Mali, the Niger
7. Asylum capacity development	Costa Rica, Morocco, the Niger, Republic of Korea, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland
8. Voluntary repatriation programmes and activities	To be determined
9. UNHCR's engagement in humanitarian-development cooperation: final report	Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Jordan, the Niger
10. Implementation of UNHCR's 2018 age, gender and diversity policy (year 1)	Headquarters and covering Chad, Greece, Kenya, Mexico, Thailand
United Nations system-wide/joint evaluations	
11. Iterative evaluation of the UNHCR/UNICEF "Blueprint for joint action for refugee children"	Bangladesh, Cameroon, Ecuador, Ethiopia, Honduras, Indonesia, Iraq, Lebanon, Libya, Rwanda
12. Inter-agency humanitarian evaluation of Yemen humanitarian response	Yemen
13. Joint UNHCR/DAC evaluation of the protection of the rights of refugees during the COVID-19 pandemic	Global
14. Inter-agency humanitarian evaluation of the global humanitarian response plan for COVID-19	Global
15. UNHCR COVID-19 evaluative evidence synthesis	Global

Evaluations	*Countries concerned*
Decentralized	
16. Rights mapping tool	Global
17. IKEA Foundation livelihoods and energy projects among Somali refugees and host communities in Ethiopia (mid-term and end-line phases)	Ethiopia
18. Relevance and effectiveness of sports programming for refugee inclusion and protection	Mexico, Rwanda
19. Caring for refugees with non-communicable diseases project	Algeria, Bangladesh, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Chad, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, Kenya, Rwanda, Uganda and the United Republic of Tanzania
20. Saving maternal and newborn lives in refugee situations project	Cameroon, Chad, the Niger
21. UK Home Office alternatives to detention community engagement pilot	United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland
22. Child protection programming	Cameroon, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ethiopia, Iran (Islamic Republic of), Iraq, Morocco, Thailand, Europe region
23. Evaluation of the *Somos Panas* campaign	Colombia
24. Evaluation of the regional refugee and resilience plan to the Syria crisis (3RP)	Regional
25. Misizi marshland agricultural project	Rwanda
26. Tertiary scholarship programme (DAFI)	To be determined
27. Humanitarian education accelerator programme	To be determined