

EVALUATION OF UNHCR'S LEVEL-3 EMERGENCY RESPONSE TO CYCLONE IDAI

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
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Conducted by Independent Consultants
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1 Methodology and approach

In line with UNHCR's emergency and evaluation policies, an evaluation of all level-3 (L3) emergency operations is to be conducted within 18 months or earlier of the response. This evaluation assesses UNHCR's response to Cyclones Idai and Kenneth in Mozambique, Zimbabwe and Malawi covering the period from March 2019 to May 2020 to identify lessons that can be extrapolated to other disaster responses and, with a broader perspective, to provide inputs into UNHCR's ongoing reflection about climate change and disaster induced displacement.

The evaluation approach evolved throughout the data collection phase and initial discussions with UNHCR teams. The evaluation has both a summative and a formative component; as part of its formative component, the evaluation concludes with a reflection on UNHCR's strategic role in the context of disasters and climate change, including a focus on policy directions and partnerships, as well as resource mobilization.

The evaluation builds on the conclusions and recommendations from an internal UNHCR lessons-learned workshop in Maputo held in January 2020. Additionally, the Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation of the Response to Cyclone Idai in Mozambique has provided relevant data about inter-agency coordination and cluster performance, areas that are lightly covered by this evaluation. The audits of UNHCR operations in Mozambique and Zimbabwe carried out by the Internal Audit Division of the Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS) have also provided a sound operational assessment of the response, mainly in terms of efficiency and risk areas.

A total of 93 key informants were interviewed in Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Malawi, the UNHCR Regional office in Pretoria and Headquarters; almost one-third of the interviewees were external stakeholders (other UN agencies, humanitarian organizations and governments). The documentary review consisted of 385 documents. The evaluation looked beyond the response to Idai to understand UNHCR's experience more broadly in responding to disaster displacement related emergencies.

The exceptional situation due to the COVID-19 pandemic caused the suspension of the planned fieldwork and the sole reliance on remote tools for interviews and discussions. In some cases, availability of informants in international organizations and governments was limited. The information about UNHCR's response to Idai made available to the evaluation team (particularly quantitative data about the number of people reached and disaggregation) has been fairly limited and fragmented. These gaps in UNHCR's reporting, although partially attributable to the time elapsing since the response to the evaluation, have significantly limited the reconstruction of the response and a sound analysis of UNHCR's performance, including specific analysis of coverage, effectiveness and efficiency, as well as the application of a gender and equity lens. Although data collected from interviews have partially mitigated the gaps, the quantitative description and analysis of UNHCR's response remains limited.

3 Context

In March and April 2019, southern Africa was hit by two consecutive cyclones (Idai and Kenneth) that affected an estimated 3 million people in Mozambique, Malawi and Zimbabwe. In Mozambique, some 1.85 million people were in need of humanitarian assistance; in Malawi, severe floods affected 870,000 people, including causing 87,000 displaced. In addition, some 1,900 people from Mozambique sought refuge in Malawi's Nsanje district. In eastern Zimbabwe, more than 270,000 people were affected by flooding, of whom approximately 51,000 were displaced. Approximately 6,000 refugees and asylum-seekers living in Tongogara Refugee Camp were also severely affected.

4 Key findings

UNHCR's response contributed partially to the goals set out in the HRPs, was more consistent during the emergency phase and became progressively weaker in the recovery phase and phase-out. Overall, UNHCR's role as protection cluster coordinator was irregular, due to gaps and discontinuity between deployments. On the positive side, UNHCR succeeded in stabilising the local protection cluster in Sofala (Mozambique) after initial gaps, and expanded its operational presence for one year, which was coherent with actual needs on the ground and cluster engagements. Other recognized relevant UNHCR contributions include the establishment of protection tools, prioritization of hard-to-reach affected communities, profiling of IDPs, supporting access to legal documentation, and mobilization of technical expertise in multiple sectors (such as protection, shelter, health, information technology).

However, the IAHE report highlights that, with the notable exception of Protection against Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (PSEA), protection had not been sufficiently mainstreamed. Moreover, the lack of clear directives/vision on how to engage and responsibly disengage in disasters, the uncertainty and contradictions about the scope of UNHCR's response to Idai (and Kenneth), the disconnect from broader UN and development contexts, serious challenges in distribution of CRIs, as well as critical resource constraints (financial and human) resulted in a fragmented and irregular delivery of protection and aid to IDPs and cross-border displaced people.

Overall, gaps in UNHCR's response to Idai affected the performance of protection coordination and delivery. Moreover, in the wake of cyclone Kenneth in Cabo Delgado (Mozambique), other humanitarian organizations were establishing a footprint to respond to humanitarian needs in a region affected by unrest and low-intensity violence, while UNHCR was withdrawing its team. This decision led to some reputation risk and was not understood by the humanitarian community - despite the fact that a few months later, UNHCR succeeded in setting up a relevant field presence in Pemba, leading protection efforts and supporting the humanitarian response in the midst of increasing tensions in the region. These events shed light on longstanding contradicting views within UNHCR concerning its engagement in conflict situations affecting refugees vis-à-vis engagement in internal displacement and most especially internal displacement due to disasters; being a provider of last resort and the adaptation of a needs-based approach to supporting IDPs. While the extent of engagement in conflict situations is well understood within UNHCR and among partners, there is need to clarify the organization's role in disaster-displacement in non-conflict situations, both for an internal and external audience.

In terms of UNHCR's policies, the evaluation has identified the perception among staff that the three criteria for engagement in IDP situations are perceived as being excessively open to interpretation and not conducive to support consistent and sound guidance for decision-making in terms of when and how to engage in disaster situations. This evaluation has also found that awareness about the IDP policy among UNHCR staff is still limited, especially among national staff. Overall, the evaluation has identified that there is no unanimous backing for UNHCR's position on climate change and disaster-related displacement, especially in terms of preparedness.

In terms of emergency preparedness, the three Country Operations (COs) did not have the policy guidance, resources and capacities to get involved in risk analysis or contingency planning efforts undertaken by national authorities, UN agencies and other development actors. Overall, UNHCR's involvement in preparedness was minimal; COs were significantly under-resourced and were managing small refugee operations, which left no room for engaging in other areas.

Concerning the integration phase, UNHCR's support to return processes and durable solutions was limited due to both contextual factors and internal shortcomings. On the one hand, pressure from governments to organize rapid return or resettlements for IDPs resulted in inadequate compliance with international standards and hampered UNHCR advocacy efforts. On the other hand, a lack of resources limited UNHCR's contribution to promote comprehensive durable solutions and a responsible disengagement approach to returnees or affected communities.

5 Conclusions

Cyclones Idai and Kenneth were two of the worst storms ever to hit Mozambique and the surrounding region. In the case of UNHCR, they represented the "perfect storm", highlighting long-standing strategic and operational gaps in responses to disasters and related internal displacement in non-conflict situations. UNHCR's mobilization to put protection at the centre of the humanitarian response, to simultaneously coordinate with a large number of actors, and to deliver large-scale aid in three countries and, particularly, the professionalism and commitment of UNHCR staff at the forefront of the response, were commendable and contributed to protecting the rights and alleviating the suffering of those most in need of assistance and protection.

However, the efforts undertaken to provide UNHCR with policies and resources to position itself as a credible and predictable protection agency in response to climate change and disaster contexts were not sufficient to ensure full compliance with key UNHCR principles and humanitarian standards. The magnitude of the disaster overwhelmed the capacities of small UNHCR COs (among the least resourced COs globally) and of the organization as a whole. It also revealed critical internal ambiguities on how to engage in climate change and disaster-related displacement. The evaluation found that there was a certain level of unpredictability surrounding UNHCR's responses to Idai and Kenneth; mainly due to inconsistencies and delays in key decision-making processes, but also due to conflicting opinions across different levels of the organization; the inertia of managing small protracted refugee situations, and the isolation of these operations from national/development partners. These factors largely contributed to an irregular and below-standard response, despite some operational achievements and UNHCR contributions to the humanitarian response.

The evaluation draws five broad conclusions which offer both a strategic reflection on UNHCR's positioning in climate-related disaster displacement, and an operational reflection regarding preparedness and emergency response.

Conclusion 1: UNHCR's response to cyclone Idai revealed a critical "policy-implementation gap" concerning its engagement in climate-related disaster displacement in non-conflict situations. The organization was not able to fully implement its own policies concerning emergency and IDP responses, or the internal guidance documents and international orientations on climate change, disasters or risk reduction.

Conclusion 2: UNHCR's lack of engagement in the response to cyclone Kenneth illustrated the long-standing and unresolved debate on how to intervene in disasters in non-conflict situations. **Not only the contradictions in the engagement to respond to Kenneth but also the shortcomings in the response to Idai impacted on the reputation of the organization as a credible and predictable actor** in situations of natural hazards, disasters, and climate-related internal displacement.

Conclusion 3: UNHCR's overall **performance in the response to Idai and Kenneth was significantly determined by its ambivalence to disaster situations, as well as the inability to mobilize sufficient resources**, including access to the Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF), due to its hesitant and late engagement. UNHCR's performance shows conflicting outcomes. On the one hand, UNHCR's presence contributed to the reinforcement of the protection lens as a key element of the humanitarian response, despite gaps and shortcomings. On the other hand, UNHCR's effectiveness was limited and uneven throughout the three phases of the response (preparedness, response, recovery) and the agency was unable to ensure consistent standards of protection for persons of concern (PoC) throughout the three phases.

Conclusion 4: **The limited involvement of COs in the United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (UNSDCF) prior to Idai hampered its ability to participate in key UN decision-making forums when Idai hit.** The COs were working on regular refugee programmes, almost in isolation from the broader development context and without stable and well-established relations with the UN system and national actors. Amidst a large-scale emergency, UNHCR struggled to timely articulate its interaction with other agencies and, particularly, to identify new implementing partners to support the operational response on the ground.

Conclusion 5: **Idai has revealed the stagnating situation of small protracted refugee operations and the difficulties these face in terms of responding to large onset disasters and contextual changes**, particularly in regard to securing adequate resources and limited technical capacity to invest in emergency preparedness.

The evaluation proposes six recommendations below to strengthen UNHCR's policies and positioning in climate-related disaster displacement, as well as its performance and engagement in disaster preparedness, response, and recovery.

6 Recommendations

6.1 UNHCR policies and positioning on disaster-related displacement

UNHCR's vision and positioning on climate change and disaster-related displacement

Recommendation 1: Integrate existing policies and guidelines¹ containing relevant provisions on the organization's directions and actions in disaster related displacement into guidance on UNHCR's engagement in disasters, clarifying when UNHCR will engage, how (long) it will engage, and what role operations and bureaux will have across the different phases of a disaster response (from preparedness, response, to recovery). Provide clarity on decisions regarding resourcing, external relations, engagement and responsible disengagement

Responsibility: SET in consultation with DESS, DIP, DRS, OSACA

UNHCR planning, budgeting and procedures on climate change and disaster-related displacement

Recommendation 2: Develop regional/country operational action plans linked to the proposed guidance on UNHCR's engagement in disasters and UNHCR's Strategic Framework on Climate Action, which offer a framework for risk assessment, resourcing, monitoring and evaluation, engagement with UNCT/UNHCT and other partners, and implementation modalities for operations in the event of a natural hazard or disaster.

Responsibility: SET (AHCO) in consultation with OSACA, regional bureau, and DSPR

6.2 Participation in UNCT / UNHCT coordination and partnerships

UNHCR's participation in UN country team coordination systems and UNSDCF

Recommendation 3: Reinforce UNHCR's participation in UN country team coordination systems, and take an active role under the United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (UNSDCF) with the aim of participating in preparedness actions, mainstreaming protection across the humanitarian-development nexus and broadening relations with relevant public bodies (other than refugee agencies) and civil society organizations (CSOs) in selected disaster-prone countries.

Responsibility: SET (AHCO) in consultation with regional bureaux and country representatives

Partnerships with agencies and global initiatives on climate change and disaster-related displacement

Recommendation 4: Reinforce UNHCR's commitment to climate action initiatives and develop further partnerships with agencies and global initiatives on disaster-related displacement, especially in the field of disaster risk reduction, preparedness, anticipatory actions and durable solutions for IDPs.

Responsibility: SET in consultation with OSACA, DESS, DER, and DRS

¹ The main documents referred to here are: i) Policy on Emergency Preparedness and Response, UNHCR/HCP/2017/1/Rev.1, August 2019, ii) Policy on Engagement in Situations of Internal Displacement, UNHCR/HCP/2019/1, 18 September 2019, iii) Guidance Package for UNHCR's Engagement in Situations of Internal Displacement, Version 1, September 2019, iv) UNHCR Preparedness Package for IDP Emergencies (PPIE), January 2020.

6.3 External relations, resource mobilization and communication

Procedures for resource mobilisation and communications in situations of natural disasters

Recommendation 5: Develop a consistent narrative to support communication, fundraising and donor-related actions, as part of the strategic reflection about UNHCR's positioning on climate change and disaster-related displacement. In many cases, investing in the early deployment of communication officers, together with reporting and external relations profiles, may lead to positive returns in terms of funding, especially in highly competitive and crowded humanitarian responses to large-scale disasters.

Responsibility: SET in consultation with DER and regional bureaux

6.4 Capacity building and technical support

Skills development on preparedness, disaster risk reduction and disaster response

Recommendation 6: Reinforce disaster response capacities through training of staff involved in emergency responses, and upskill national staff to enable them to lead and coordinate preparedness and emergency responses locally.

Responsibility: DESS in consultation with GLDC