



Purpose: Present timely evidence to inform UNHCR's future operational planning and strategy in the Nordic and Baltic countries

Evaluation type: Multi-Country Strategic Evaluation (Centralized)

Methods: Mixed methods evaluation with 3 case study countries

Implemented: June-December 2021

Scope: 2017-2020 in the eight countries managed by the Multi-Country Office based in Stockholm (Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Iceland, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway and Sweden). Given developments in the region in 2021 some consideration of events in 2021 is implicit within the evaluation.

Commissioned by: Evaluation Service

1. Evaluation Context

In 2021, UNHCR's Evaluation Service commissioned an external strategic evaluation of UNHCR's Operations in the Nordic and Baltic countries. An independent assessment and review of the activities of UNHCR were deemed necessary to reflect on a number of ongoing developments, both internally within the Organization and externally in the protection environment in the region. This evaluation therefore presented an opportunity to take stock of UNHCR operations in the Nordic and Baltic countries, to identify the first results of ongoing change processes and to reflect on UNHCR's contribution to enhance international protection for Persons of Concern (POC) in the region.

Initially, when this evaluation was commissioned the focus of this exercise was the delivery of the Office's Multi Year Multi-Partner (MYMP) strategy between the years 2017-2020. During the course of the evaluation, significant contextual developments occurred within the region, with a sudden and exponential increase in the number of asylum-seekers coming across from Belarus into Lithuania and Latvia. These challenging developments were further compounded by the large-scale displacement of Ukrainians and other nationalities resident in Ukraine (internal and cross border) following the escalation of conflict in Ukraine in February 2022.

Data gathering and analysis was completed prior to the Ukrainian situation and thus could not take into account the plethora of policy changes in Europe nor the effects on UNHCR operations or, most importantly, on UNHCR's persons of concern. Nevertheless, it is hoped that the

conclusions and recommendations that follow will support and streamline UNHCR's work in the Nordic and Baltic countries by addressing gaps and structural challenges.

2. Key Findings

On **prioritization of protection and solutions work**, the evaluation observed that:

1. In its desire to ensure that the high legal protection standards that the Nordic region is known for are maintained, the Representation for the Nordic and Baltic Countries (RNB) has continued to organize and deliver its work on protection using relatively traditional approaches (i.e., a heavy focus on commentaries on the normative legal framework for litigation on asylum cases and commentaries on the normative legal frameworks, as well as advocacy on resettlement). The evaluation team, while noting that this work is key to UNHCR's normative role observed that the RNB could have found opportunities to move beyond "doing business as usual" and been more creative in delivering its protection mandate. The RNB has however, been more innovative in the area of solutions by venturing into the "uncharted territory" of complementary pathways, following its recognition of a political opportunity in a number of countries to do so.
2. While the strategic planning approach facilitated by participating in the early piloting of the Multi-Year Multi Partners (MYMP) 2017- 2021 has been assessed as helpful, it has not had a far-reaching impact on guiding the prioritization of the RNB in the period that the evaluation covered. It is therefore too early to appreciate the full ramifications of the introduction of an organization-wide framework for multi-year planning.
3. In the future, the RNB is likely to face multiple scenarios of population movements and pressures to reduce protection standards in the countries it is responsible for. While the RNB has responded appropriately to the policy and context changes in the sub-region, its capacity to respond on multiple fronts simultaneously in an effective and timely manner may be challenged without additional capacity.

On **operational structure and resources of UNHCR** the evaluation identified that:

1. The RNB has so far not found the optimal structure to deliver on its priorities and to deal with emerging challenges. Ad-hoc attempts hamper a strategic approach towards in-country presences which could match regional priorities, opportunities at country-level

and risk analysis. Decentralization has not solved the challenges posed by the RNB's current structure.

2. The current financial and personnel resources of the RNB challenge the effectiveness and efficiency of the office in light of its discrepant geographical responsibilities. The division of tasks within the RNB structure and capacities are a constant dilemma.
3. The relationship between the RNB and other UNHCR entities is generally strong, but is hampered by the lack of a clear understanding of division of responsibilities with UNHCR HQ and Regional Bureau for Europe (RBE) and of an appreciation of the capacities of the RNB to achieve these.
4. The new RBM (**COMPASS**) approach is potentially valuable and useful to manage and demonstrate results, but there are constraining factors influencing the full leveraging of the system for country-based planning and analysis and evidence-based decision-making.

On the **extent to which the RNB sufficiently leveraged partnerships with relevant stakeholders**, the evaluation noted that:

1. There are untapped opportunities to further identify, develop and strengthen partnerships in the Nordic and Baltic countries. Cooperation with partners have been constrained by limited human resources and a focus on more traditional approaches in the sub-region such as a focus on litigation.
2. The RNB was not able to fully meet its objectives in terms of advocacy and visibility of refugee and stateless related issues in the Nordic and Baltic countries. There is a need to address and balance expectations from CSOs and other private stakeholders in light of their expressed need for more robust engagement by UNHCR in the public arena.
3. The Global Compact on Refugees (GCR) process in the Nordic and Baltic countries is led by UNHCR HQ with limited involvement of the RNB. The GCR approach has the potential to further leverage UNHCR's role in the Nordic and Baltic countries by explicitly tying global solutions to domestic issues in the sub-region.

3. Conclusions

The number of legal and contextual developments in the region, and the need to continue to advocate for upholding protection standards in conformity with the 1951 Convention demonstrates the importance of effective representation in the Nordic and Baltic countries based on detailed contextual knowledge alongside maintaining strong relationships with civil society and State stakeholders. The last six years have clearly demonstrated that the Nordic and Baltic countries are not a static protection environment. UNHCR Offices across the European region, including the RNB, will have to continue to adapt in order to address the legislative changes.

The Office may consider rebalancing its investment in legal support and litigation – reserving its interventions to only those cases that have direct relevance for the interpretation of the 1951 Convention. More generally, an in-depth reflection process is needed as to what role UNHCR can

effectively take on in environments such as the Nordics and Baltics, and to more clearly define and communicate its added value, including for UNHCR to more actively amplify refugee voices and commit to fully support partners working on statelessness.

It is vital for the RNB that the operation retains its nimbleness and ability to swiftly pivot, and to continue to manage a range of different challenges and relationships in the region. The Office will continue to have to find and maintain a workable balance in terms of managing its priorities within finite financial resources, selecting staff with the right expertise and language skills, and building coherence between the office in Stockholm and country presences. The RNB is unable to deal with additional requests without staff members becoming quickly exhausted and with the regular priorities hampered.

The change process initiated by UNHCR is a step in the right direction as the Organization is now oriented to formally record and strengthen its strategic thinking with a longer-term perspective and through a more coherent results-based management framework. There is a need for clarification and streamlining of the way in which the RNB and potentially other Multi-Country Offices interlock and interact with the Regional Bureau and the broader HQ services and divisions, and for a more tailored approach to the way in which corporate tools consider the unique nature of these structures within UNHCR. While on the whole the support provided by the Bureau and Headquarters Divisions, to the RNB has been effective, there has been friction and a lack of coherence between the RNB, UNHCR's HQ and the RBE, and missed opportunities to fully capitalise on the benefits of decentralisation.

The RNB has established valuable partnerships with a range of stakeholders, yet there is room for improvement in terms of identifying, selecting and maintaining these partnerships. There is a need for greater transparency with external audiences on what the RNB's role is in the Nordics and Baltics, both with Member States and civil society partners; where possible explaining what it has prioritized and why, to better manage expectations.

Finally, the evaluation team notes that there has been historically a limited direct engagement with persons of concern or representative bodies outside the RNB engagement with civil society organisations. In order to add legitimacy and deepen protection and solutions analysis, the RNB would benefit from finding avenues to periodically and more directly exchange with persons of concern and have a first-hand understanding of their conditions and the challenges they face.

4. Evaluation Recommendations

For the RNB	Communicate more transparently on the RNB's role in the region to States and partners with the aim to better manage expectations.
	Strengthen the strategic and forward-looking approach of the RNB by reorienting its priorities towards greater investment in relationships with Government, civil society, NGO partners and other stakeholders.
	Re-emphasize UNHCR's role to amplify refugee voices and perspectives and ensure that persons of concern are more visible in UNHCR's communication and advocacy strategies.
For the Bureau	Enhance and strengthen the RBE's capacity to provide normative guidance, maintain coherence and manage information flows between HQ and the RNB. Moreover, the RBE should further clarify its role, available capacities and resources in emergency or emergency like situations for Europe at large.
For UNHCR HQ	Streamline tools, guidance and processes by "rightsizing" UNHCR's RBM and reporting expectations with regards to the RNB and other similarly sized operations.
	Jointly clarify the respective roles of the Division of External Relations (DER), the RBE and the RNB in resource mobilisation; and enhance internal communications on resource mobilisation

Full Report available [here](#)

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