

Evaluation of UNHCR's Repatriation Programmes and Activities 2015-2021

Evaluation Brief

Purpose: Generate evidence, insights and learning around UNHCR's support to repatriation and reintegration across different contexts, and to contribute towards developing UNHCR policy and guidance on this subject matter, including the next iteration of UNHCR's voluntary repatriation handbook.

Evaluation type: Global Strategic/Thematic Evaluation




Methods: Mixed methods including key informant interviews and focus group discussion.

Scope: Covers the period of 2015-2021. Geographically the scope was global with a focus on Iran, Republic of Congo, Tanzania as Country of Asylum, Burundi, Central African Republic, and Colombia as Countries of Origin.

Context

By the end of 2020, there were 82.4 million people displaced worldwide; of these, 20.7 million were categorized as refugees under UNHCR's mandate. For refugees, UNHCR considers that there are three broad types of 'durable solutions', aimed at resolving the problem of forced displacement in a permanent manner: voluntary repatriation; local integration; and resettlement to other countries.

This evaluation was commissioned primarily with the intentions of reflecting on UNHCR's current support to voluntary repatriation and reintegration, identifying enabling constraining factors with different operational contexts, documenting good practices, and contributing towards updating UNHCR policy and guidance on repatriation and reintegration.

REPATRIATION SUPPORT MODALITIES			
	Systematically	To the extent possible	
			
Tripartite Agreement met. UNHCR, Countries of asylum and Countries of origin	✓	✓	
Provision to refugees of information on conditions in their countries of origin	✓	✓	✓
Interviewing, counselling and registering potential returnees	✓	✓	
Provision of collective transport to returnees and reception on arrival	✓	✓	
Assistance in transit and/or on arrival (e.g. food, non-food, cash)	✓	✓	✓
Civil documentation and housing, land and property support	✓	✓	✓
Protection monitoring upon return	✓	✓	✓
Long-term reintegration support in countries of origin	✓	✓	✓

Key Findings

UNHCR's support to voluntary repatriation and reintegration varies in different contexts

The relevance of UNHCR interventions in support of voluntary

KEY EVALUATION TAKE AWAYS



Reflecting the voice and aspirations of refugees and better capturing the complexity of their decision-making on return, remains key in both the design and implementation of UNHCR's voluntary repatriation activities



UNHCR's operating models and guidance in support of voluntary repatriation are outdated and lack adaptiveness to complex environments



UNHCR's effectiveness in the coordination of repatriation operations is widely recognised. Long-term reintegration support, however, still poses significant challenges



Although it is the most widely used model, facilitated returns do not adequately address the needs of many refugees who, as a result, often decide to return by their own means, with limited UNHCR assistance



Challenges remain in UNHCR's consistent and systematic collection and sharing of operations-level data on repatriation and reintegration activities



Area-based approaches offer promising avenues for reintegration programming, as they can facilitate multi-stakeholder engagement and increase the sustainability of returns

return is often affected by the political dynamics of repatriation operations. These dynamics can be especially powerful where assisted repatriation operations are planned as part of a broader process of negotiated peace and political transition.

UNHCR guidance on repatriation and reintegration is outdated and does not align well with key UNHCR policies adopted in recent years. The available guidance is also scant in reintegration, even though this area is challenging and strategically highly significant. Notwithstanding, the guidance provides an important if incomplete basis for programming and is widely consulted at country level.

The relevance of UNHCR activities in support of repatriation and reintegration is more pronounced in countries of asylum, where they rest on a firm legal basis, are geared to clear and time-bound objectives, and can typically draw on strong operation capacity.

The situation is more complex in countries of origin, where UNHCR's reintegration efforts are set in longer time, and entail shared responsibilities and co-dependencies with diverse stakeholders. In these conditions, the relevance of actions taken is harder to verify and achieve.

UNHCR's policies and guidance do not accurately translate into practical solutions for operations realities on the ground

The coherence of UNHCR's approach to voluntary repatriation is strained by the fact that support activities do not always accurately capture the aspirations of refugees, or the complexity of the decisions they make regarding their return. Notably, multiple respondents in the evaluation had reservations on

whether voluntary returns should continue to be referred to as the preferred durable solution for returnees.

In facilitated returns, which are the repatriation modality often supported by UNHCR, logistics and administrative tasks are typically well-honed and efficiently carried out. However, a lack of timely, localized information for prospective returnees was reported by respondents.

Facilitated returns occur in situations of low risk. There is some evidence when facilitation is suspended or scaled down for security reasons, refugees opt for the riskiest option of returning by their own means, outside of formal repatriation frameworks. Thus, in the aggregate, facilitation displaces the risk to returnees but does not reduce it.

UNHCR can leverage its lead role in repatriation movements with relevant stakeholders

UNHCR's leadership and operation coordination have been effective in terms of organizing the practical aspects of returns, including pre-departure assistance and support on arrival. Regarding the UNHCR's efforts to engage development actors and catalyse their support for long-term integration, results have been elusive. For the most part, the obstacles encountered by UNHCR in its pursuit of reintegration partnerships stem from competing leaderships, complex cooperation arrangements, shared accountabilities, and distinct conceptions of Durable Solutions. Partnerships in reintegration are also hampered by contextual factors, including moderate risk appetite on the part of development actors and their donors.

Challenges also remain with the consistent and systematic data collection and use of operations-level data on repatriation and reintegration activities. This impedes institutional lesson learning and is an obstacle in UNHCR's global leadership and pursuit of Global Compact on Refugees (GCR) objectives.

UNHCR efforts in repatriation and reintegration activities to become more sustainable varies

The extent to which UNHCR has adapted repatriation and reintegration activities to become more sustainable varies across countries of asylum and countries of origin. The financial, operation and policy burden of supporting the sustainability of return falls more heavily on reintegration programming than on short-term assistance provided for repatriation. This is not reflected in UNHCR budget allocations, which continue to be higher for assisted returns than for reintegration support.

Recommendations

Normative Framework, Policy and Guidelines

- a. Attenuate the operation bias placed on voluntary returns by the formal statement, conveyed in UNHCR policy that this solution is the most preferable for refugees, and **place more emphasis on contextual realities, returnee needs, and the**

principles of voluntariness, safety and dignity in assisted returns.

- b. **Update existing guidance materials, including Handbook on Voluntary Repatriation (1996) and Handbook for Repatriation and Reintegration Activities (2004)** to reflect contemporary norms and policy orientations conveyed in the GCR and Strategic Directions 2017-2021, and to provide guidance on new approaches and tools.

Operationalization and programming

- c. In the design of repatriation and reintegration support interventions, **place heavier emphasis on needs assessment and analysis**. In particular, ensure that the needs and vulnerabilities of refugees to return independently, outside of formal repatriation operations, are accurately captured and reflected in assessments and programme design.
- d. Structurally **enhance the participation of prospective returnees** in decisions relating to their return.
- e. Based on a more systematic assessment of contexts of return, **explore modalities for reintegration support** that better accommodate the need of many returnees to retain some mobility post-return.

Information Management

- f. Ensure that the information supplied by UNHCR to prospective returnees, in view of supporting their decisions on return, is **more timely and more localized**.
- g. For the collection and dissemination of information relating to conditions in countries of origin, as well as for outreach activities aimed at **the greater inclusion of refugees in repatriation programming, mainstream the use of digital platforms and social media tools**.

Coordination and partnerships

- h. Drawing on the framework set by UN Secretary-General Decision n. 2011/20, **achieve better alignment between the two distinct conceptions of Durable Solutions** held by UNHCR and its development partners and clarify how these conceptions can be harmonized at the operational level.
- i. **At the country and regional level**, support the development of broader and better integrated multi-partner platforms.

External relations, resource mobilization, and budgeting

- j. **Structure budgets and design funding instruments** that support reintegration intervention spanning mixed caseloads of returned refugees, returned internally displaced people (IDPs) and local communities.

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Full Evaluation Report available [here](#).

