



**UNHCR**  
The UN Refugee Agency

## Evaluative Synthesis Brief

# UNHCR's response to the COVID-19 pandemic: Synthesis of Evaluative Evidence

## UNHCR Evaluation Service

**Purpose:** To assess how UNHCR has adapted to meet its international obligations to serve its populations of concern following the COVID-19 pandemic. It aims to support ongoing learning and reflection, as the pandemic continues to evolve.

**Evaluation type and methods:** synthesis of independent evaluative evidence of the UNHCR response

**Implemented:** June 2021- April 2022

**Scope:** Evaluative evidence between March 2020-April 2022

**Commissioned by:** UNHCR's Evaluation Service and conducted by Julia Betts (independent consultant)

## 1. Context

The COVID-19 pandemic posed an existential challenge to the international community. Closed borders disrupted supply chains and restricted movement risked the lives of the vulnerable across the world. Governments struggled to uphold their international obligations to those seeking refuge on their territories, while the humanitarian community faced an uncharted operational terrain.

Upholding the special mandate and mission of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), as the guardian of the 1951 Refugee Convention and the lead of the Global Compact on Refugees, posed immense strategic and operational challenges. UNHCR faced the triple dilemma of sustaining its own service delivery and continuing to advocate for the world's displaced, while suffering the effects of the pandemic on its own organisation.

The synthesis was based on independent evidence from 27 UNHCR evaluations of its response to the COVID-19 pandemic, from February 2020–March 2022. It examined how UNHCR adapted to serve its populations of concern, and what can be learned for the future.

## 2. Key Findings and Conclusions

Evidence from the 27 evaluations finds that UNHCR maintained and sustained its commitment to PoC during the uncertain and demanding conditions of COVID-19. Driven by the founding force of the Convention and the subsequent Global Refugee Compact, whose commitments permeate UNHCR's organisational ethos, operating practices and culture, UNHCR 'stayed to deliver' to PoC – though at considerable cost to its staff.

Overall, on the evidence analysed, UNHCR deployed its assets and comparative advantages well under pandemic conditions. Its legal and technical capacities, its convening power, its advocacy abilities and its specialist expertise in refugee situations, statelessness and asylum were highlighted in evaluations from across the world.

**Responding to needs.** UNHCR assistance to its PoC was mostly appropriate and relevant. It supported communities and PoC under demanding and uncertain conditions, and amid intricate and politically-sensitive country conditions. UNHCR capitalized on its technical and advocacy capacities and tailored interventions swiftly as contexts changed. The organisation's continued and committed presence bought it credibility with governments and external actors and enhanced its reputational capital.

Amid the pandemic's demands, however, some areas of work suffered. Under the pressures of remote delivery, not all the needs of vulnerable groups were met. Refugee Status Determination (RSD) and asylum registrations saw significant operational challenges on the ground, and resettlement met major barriers. While these areas are complex and multifaceted; they are services on which PoC and the realisation of UNHCR's mandate depend. They are a priority for the future.

**Advocacy.** As the pandemic evolved, UNHCR's advocacy to support its PoC maintained momentum and, in some contexts, gathered pace. This kept it to the forefront of the international humanitarian response, and sustained the impetus of the global agenda to protect those forced to flee. UNHCR's generation of data and knowledge on the conditions of PoC have both ensured a globally-relevant response, and kept knowledge flowing on the global challenges of international protection.

**Localisation.** At the same time, the evaluations find that PoC agency to engage in, and at times direct, their own response has come to the fore. For many humanitarian actors, this is a fundamental conceptual shift. It forms a critical part of the post COVID-19 landscape of the future, and one on which UNHCR is well-positioned to lead.

**The costs of staying to deliver.** However, UNHCR's operational achievements incurred some high internal costs. The laudable and sincerely-felt commitment to '*Stay and Deliver*' to those in need – so integral to the organisational DNA, and so important to partners and PoC on the ground – required complex trade-offs with UNHCR's responsibilities to staff. Evidence from these 27 evaluations finds corporate good intentions, of sustained commitment to PoC and avoiding a corporate divide between HQ- and field-based staff, unsupported, in the early stages of the pandemic, by i) comprehensive institutional frameworks, such as to ensure staff's mental health and ii) explicit recognition of, and adaptive capacity for, specific individual circumstances.

The evaluations find that much has been learned, and a more empathetic, and arguably human, approach, is now emerging. But bearing the 'double burdens' of the pandemic response, amid an initial sense of being 'less important' to their organisation than the people they serve, has weighed heavily on staff; and frustrations continue to linger.

**Investing in systems:** The evaluations also illuminate the ethos, culture and driving force of a Convention-based organisation. The fundamentals of the Convention, supported by the practice and commitment to serve PoC to the best of organisational ability, drove deeply and sincerely-felt corporate choices. But at times, the functional building blocks were missing. The relatively new decentralisation process offered support in some cases, but this was neither consistently available nor sufficiently mature to provide the needed support.

**Looking forwards.** The continuing effects of the pandemic – and particularly the socioeconomic costs – are placing a significant strain on UNHCR's current and future planning. As inequalities and marginalisation continue to deepen, the

rationale for a stronger focus on economic inclusion for PoC continues to grow.

Overall, the findings of these evaluations suggest that UNHCR has mostly risen to meet the demands of the pandemic. The spirit of commitment, and of 'Staying to Deliver', even amid immense uncertainty, was laudable in principle, even if imperfectly executed.

### 3. Enabling and constraining factors

The evaluations highlight six main internal factors which helped enable UNHCR's response to COVID-19, and five which constrained it:

#### Enabling factors

1. The driving force of the **institutional raison d'être** and its basis in the Convention
2. The **corporate Level 2 emergency declaration**, which prioritised the response and enabled greater flexibility in funding and staffing arrangements
3. **UNHCR's human capital**, including staff professional identities as humanitarians and their sense of professional dedication;
4. **UNHCR's emergency instinct** and operational agility which enabled swift adaptation to needs;
5. **Relationships at country level**, with mutual respect and a trusted status facilitating partnerships
6. **Communication capacity**, with UNHCR perceived as a trusted source of information for PoC.

#### Constraints

1. **Procedural challenges**, for example on local procurement and financial service provider provision under global pandemic conditions.
2. The **reversion to emergency response** and de-prioritisation of issues such as statelessness and economic inclusion
3. **A short-term mindset**, even as the pandemic evolved to a 'here to stay' phenomenon;
4. **Uneven regional support** to Country Offices from newly-established Regional Bureaux;
5. **Inconsistent internal communication** between UNHCR's vertical and horizontal offices and units.

#### Roles adopted by UNHCR during its response to COVID-19

- **Knowledge generator** on the effects of the pandemic on PoC
- **Catalyst for PoC attention & inclusion** within COVID-19 responses, via advocacy & capacity-building
- **Protector of last resort** for PoC lacking other recourse during COVID-19
- **Facilitator** for PoC to take charge of their own response
- **Convenor of cross-sectoral dialogue** to address pandemic-related needs
- **Channel for philanthropy & corporate social responsibility**

## 4. Future Opportunities

The evaluations also offer some learning for the future, as the pandemic continues to evolve.

- 1. Emphasise economic inclusion.** Evaluations reveal risks of deepening tensions/rivalry between host populations and PoC as the socioeconomic effects of the pandemic continue to bite, with marginalisation rising and risks of disenfranchisement. This implies an even stronger and more systematic focus on economic advocacy, and a stronger programmatic emphasis on, and financing for, socioeconomic inclusion as part of durable solutions.
- 2. Complete the conceptual and operational shift of PoC as agents of their own response.** UNHCR is ahead of many actors in recognising the agency of affected populations in their own responses, along the continuum from participation to architects and even leaders. Evaluations analysed here find progress, but more achievements still to come. UNHCR could take a stronger and more explicit corporate stance here, as part of both global advocacy and operational programming, in support of the localisation agenda, supported by its NGO partners.
- 3. Capitalise on UNHCR's role as a trusted communicator.** With distrust of public health measures and COVID-19 misinformation at high levels among many PoC, the role of UNHCR as a trusted and reliable interlocutor cannot be overstated. UNHCR can play a valuable role in combating misinformation and communicating critical health messages where other interlocutors may lack either access or credibility. Communication is a substantive area of expertise, and should be invested in and prioritised accordingly.
- 4. Remain sighted on status issues.** Issues such as resettlement and reintegration, alongside RSD, can be complex to deliver amid pandemic conditions. But the price of their suspension is exceptionally high, particularly given UNHCR's perceived role as protector of and advocate for PoC and amid an increasing number of protracted crises. To avoid reputational/perceptual risk, UNHCR would be well advised to prioritise these elements in any future crisis response, given the high reputational capital associated with them.

- 5. Adjust procedurally for global responses.** UNHCR's operational preparedness on the ground has not always been matched by procedural readiness, in the form of globally-applicable frameworks to expedite and facilitate swift emergency responses. Creating central frameworks with scope for adaptation - for example for cash based responses at early stage of a crisis - and retaining (and where feasible increasing) partnership adaptations made during the COVID-19 period will benefit the organisation's future capability to respond.
- 6. Continue to restore the values-based bond with staff.** The heavily values-based social contract between staff and their institution - which many have served for decades - has, under the magnification and pressures of COVID-19, come under strain. While corporate efforts have been made, staff's lingering frustrations indicate that continued restoration is needed; that sacrifices are not forgotten but still recognised and appreciated; that loyalty is not taken for granted but valued and respected; and that lived experience during the pandemic will continue to be gathered, listened to, and sincerely learned from. Delivered with commitment, and if permeated down through management at all levels of the organisation, this ongoing recognition will help restore the integrity of relationships. In doing so, it will also support UNHCR's own continued organisational recovery from COVID-19.

## Find out more

Full report available [here](#)

Two interim reports were issued during the synthesis process, in [October 2021](#) and [January 2022](#).

More on UNHCR'S approach to evaluating the COVID-19 response for refugees and other persons of concern can be found [here](#).

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