Evaluation of UNHCR's engagement in situations of internal displacement

Evaluation Report – Executive Summary

UNHCR Evaluation Office

UNHCR's Evaluation Policy confirms UNHCR's commitment to support accountability, learning and continual improvement through the systematic examination and analysis of organisational policies, strategies and programmes. Evaluations are guided by the principles of impartiality, credibility and utility, and are undertaken to enhance the organisation's performance in addressing the protection, assistance and solution needs of refugees, stateless people and other persons of concern.

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Acknowledgement

Evaluation information at a glance	
Title of the evaluation:	Evaluation of UNHCR's engagement in situation of internal displacement
Time frame covered:	2019–2023
Completion Year:	2023
Type of evaluation:	Global Strategic Thematic
In-depth country case studies:	El Salvador, Iraq, Nigeria, Somalia
Light-touch country reviews:	Central African Republic (CAR), Colombia, Georgia, Myanmar, Syria
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Commissioned and Quality Assured by UNHCR's Evaluation Office

Executive summary

Background

This global thematic evaluation, commissioned by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) Evaluation Office (EvO), assesses the strategic relevance, effectiveness, connectedness, and coherence of UNHCR's engagement in situations of internal displacement from 2019 to 2023. The purpose of the evaluation is to generate evidence that will inform UNHCR's policies and operational approach, including the forthcoming Strategic Focus Area Plan, and enhance the Agency's engagement on responses and solutions for internally displaced people. The evaluation addresses five learning-focused questions to identify lessons for UNHCR's future positioning and the implementation of its commitments and approaches in Internally Displaced People (IDP) settings. The evaluation focuses on UNHCR's roles and also considers some of UNHCR's internal organisational systems and processes.

The scope of the evaluation is global and is based on a range of country case studies. It is complemented by other global data including from interviews, document review, data analysis, and a targeted survey to UNHCR staff in all countries where there are operations for internally displaced people. The evaluation involved a total of 723 participants, comprising interviewees from external stakeholders, individuals directly affected by internal displacement, and UNHCR staff.

Context

The scale of displacment increased significantly between 2019 and 2023, reaching an all-time high of 71.1 million displacements at the end of 2022.[1] IDP settings are highly diverse with differences in causes and duration of displacement, the government's willingness and capacity to assist IDPs, the nature of the population affected by forced displacement and the security and socio-economic context. The drivers of displacement are complex with 43 out of 65 countries experiencing internal displacement caused by a combination of conflict and natural disasters.[2] Furthermore, UNHCR' estimates that 70 per cent of those affected by internal displacement are situated outside camp environments, and are living primarily in urban areas.[3] The protection environment for IDPs is characterized by high levels of risk of physical attacks, discrimination and restrictions on IDPs' rights,[4] particularly in conflict settings. A further operational challenge is the pressurised funding environment in which the gap between needs and resources has continued to grow.

The evaluation is taking place close to the fifth anniversary of the "Policy on UNHCR's engagement in situations of internal displacement", adopted by UNHCR in 2019. It emphasises UNHCR's intent to strengthen its role in protection and supporting solutions for IDPs in collaboration with states, partners and affected populations. Since 2019 UNHCR has increased the scale of IDPs reached with assistance and protection interventions and initiated a number of internal developments to support engagement in IDP settings including training and recruitment processes. This is set against a context of UNHCR's core madate and strong focus on refugees.

Key findings

Operational delivery of assistance and protection

UNHCR adapted its operational strategy for country contexts in response to factors including the political landscape, geographic distribution and settlement patterns of the IDP population, and the security environment. UNHCR tailored both its assistance and protection strategies through: (a) community-based approaches, with a strong focus on outreach to dispersed populations; (b) area-based approaches; and (c) localised strategies for specific complex situations.

Identified results included meeting immediate emergency needs, enhanced access to rights and improved services as well as catalysing support from other actors. UNHCR's approaches benefitted from its strong relationships with communities and authorities, the reach of operational partners and holistic approaches that linked awareness-raising with its delivery of protection and assistance.

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[1] IDMC, Global Report on Internal Displacement 2023
[2] Drawn from UNHCR own analysis using data from IDMC, 2023.
[3] UNHCR analysis: DSPR 2023.
[4] UNHCR Global Production Cluster, Global Protection Update, 2023. For further discussion on the protection environment for IDPs see Phil Orchard. Protecting Internally Displaced Persons: Rhetoric and Reality. Routledge Press. 2019.

Constraints included limitations in preparedness, limited adaptability to move from a refugee focus to working with disaster displaced populations, and difficulties in shifting from emergency assistance to interventions more suited to protracted situations. Further, the customization of strategies results in differences in the scope and boundaries of UNHCR engagement in different countries, which undermines commitments on predictability.

Cluster leadership

UNHCR demonstrated creativity and flexibility in responding to different and difficult operational contexts to fulfil its leadership responsibilities in camp coordination and camp management (CCCM), protection and shelter, enabled by a strong organisational commitment to and investment in the cluster leadership role, although capacity challenges remain. UNHCR achieved significant results in terms of the numbers of people reached with assistance and protection by the members of clusters and funds mobilised, although CCCM funding levels were generally lower. UNHCR's leadership contributed to more harmonised inter-agency cooperation and improved operational quality, including responsible disengagement.

Resource constraints were often addressed by operational staff "double-hatting", which can present accountability challenges. The evidence found inconsistencies concerning UNHCR's performance in cluster leadership within mixed-population contexts involving both refugees and IDPs. Additionally, in disaster situations, there was evidence of a lack of preparedness within UNHCR to assume cluster roles.

Promotion of the centrality of protection

UNHCR's strategies and approaches to promote the centrality of protection were adapted to operational and political contexts with a particular focus on measures to strengthen the legal and policy framework, as well as advocacy and support to Humanitarian Country Teams (HCTs). Results include governments' development and adoption of laws and policies on IDPs. Evidence of results from other strategies is less robust. Uncertainty regarding the meaning of the term "centrality of protection" and how to respond to inconsistent HCT application of responsibilities for the centrality of protection as well as human capacity constraints limited the scope of UNHCR approaches.

Provision of data, analysis and evidence

UNHCR has developed approaches at country level to address identified data, analysis and evidence deficiencies in countries where there are significant gaps. Its contributions include protection risk monitoring and the ability to draw upon its rich operational data and the capacity of its network of partners. These strengths enable relevant contributions to inter-agency data initiatives. UNHCR's investment in its data and analysis capabilities, development of new global partnership and data sharing agreements have yielded benefits for its roles in multi-agency efforts to develop evidence and support government data management capacity but there are still limitations in UNHCR's capacity. UNHCR's evidence is utilised by other stakeholders, but its full potential is hindered by limited engagement with key users and synergies are not maximized with other data processes, notably the IOM Displacement Tracking Matrix.

Contribution to durable solutions

UNHCR supported the development of normative frameworks for inter-agency approaches to solutions in IDP settings through its protection leadership and advocated for and supported their adoption by host governments. UNHCR supported the leadership and capacity of governments to pursue solutions for their IDP populations through provision of technical and financial assistance. UNHCR has also made significant contributions towards durable solutions in terms of access to documentation, interventions supporting access to justice and resolution of housing, land and property issues. Protection risk monitoring also makes a significant contribution to the safety and security of IDPs over time. Furthermore, area-based approaches have demonstrated potential benefits, particularly in mixed population settings, but the scale of results of this approach is limited due to cost which tends to confine them to a small proportion of overall populations in need. UNHCR contributions have been enabled by UNHCR legal and other technical expertise, effective relationship-building with authorities and by its evolving abilities to work collaboratively within multi-agency arrangements.

Operational enablers- UNHCR organizational systems and processes

Developments in UNHCR's organisational processes and systems have improved its engagement in situations of internal displacement including through enhanced resource mobilsation for IDPs, staff recruitment and training initiatives for IDP settings and the development of relevant policies and guidance.

Refugees - rather than IDPs - remain by far the population group receiving the most UNHCR resources. This is a function of UNHCR's specific mandate, and the extent to which it takes financial responsibility for assistance and protecton services to this group. Nonetheless, it highlights the need for a rationale, which the evaluation could not find, to underpin its approach to equity and to frame the notion of needs-based assistance. Challenges remain in mobilizing resources and in communicating UNHCR's role in IDP settings to donors as well as in gaps in human resource capacity for the wide range of roles UNHCR undertakes in IDP settings.

Country Offices require practical support in their application of UNHCR policy commitments in specific operational settings. Also, while the evolving results-based management system shows promise for increased focus on outcomes, adjustments are needed to ensure outcomes for IDPs and UNHCR's contributions to multiagency initiatives can both be effectively assessed.

Conclusions

Relevance

The relevance of UNHCR interventions was supported by its tailoring of country strategies to specific contexts; this was enabled by decentralised decision-making and organizational responsiveness when flexible resources were available but hindered by limitations in preparedness. An explicit rationale across UNHCR to inform resource allocation and defined boundaries is needed for decision-making processes to be consistent and transparent. Country contexts in which humanitarian and protection principles are under pressure pose a challenge to UNHCR's formulation of relevant strategies.

Effectiveness

UNHCR's effectiveness has consistently been aided by its community base, the network of partners at country and global levels, technical expertise in protection, notably in law and policy, and sustained interventions over time. The ability to assess effectiveness was limited by shortcomings of UNHCR's monitoring and reporting systems which have little data on outcomes for IDPs and how these are sustained over time. The most important factor limiting effectiveness was that Country Offices were stretched trying to meet all UNHCR commitments. The situation highlights the need for prioritisation given the ongoing gap between needs and resources.

Connectedness

UNHCR worked well in multi-agency settings and has demonstrated robust cooperation with other actors – namely, UN and international organizations, governments and civil society from local to global levels. However, there are areas where this can be strengthened, for instance, to improve efficiency in the leadership of CCCM clusters, especially in countries where a dual leadership model with IOM has evolved, and to build on potential synergies in data and evidence.

UNHCR has maintained a focus on promoting government responsibility for IDPs. There has also been a positive move to increase cooperation with organisations in implementation but there were more limited opportunities for IDPs and local organizations in shared decision-making. Despite much positive cooperation with development agencies in specific initiatives and countries, tensions remain in how development actors and UNHCR response to some government initiatives when contexts remain dynamic and insecure.

Coherence

UNHCR has worked in line with its 2019 IDP policy for engagement in situaions of internal displacement, and Country Offices are both aware of and committed to the policy. But Country Offices struggled to apply policy commitments in practical ways in their particular contexts. Greater clarity is needed on how to apply: a) UNHCR intentions towards an equitable needs-based approach that is consistent with UNHCR's responsibilities in relation to IDPs, refugees and others; b) the meaningful implementation of "provider of last resort", particularly when resources are insufficient; c) reinforcement of government responsibilities in IDP settings when humanitarian principles are challenged; d) responsible disengagement, including during the deactivation of clusters and e) "solutions from the start" in dynamic and insecure contexts.

Strategic positioning

The comparative advantage of UNHCR is clearly in protection – an advantage enhanced by its field presence, its engagement at the community through to global levels, its network of partners, its expertise in law and policy, its authority and convening power and protection lead and its sustained engagement over years with

governments. The evaluation found this comparative advantage in each of the roles considered and concludes that UNHCR would benefit from consolidating its positioning around these areas.

Recommendations

The recommendations respond to the evaluation's findings and their implications for UNHCR future strategy and programme implementation in situations of internal displacement.

Recommendation 1: Strategic positioning

Promote UNHCR's comparative advantage in protection as a key element in how UNHCR is positioned in situations of internal displacement. Operationalise the strategic positioning through the consistent provision of protection technical expertise and advocacy at global and country levels, through operational delivery of services and through its cluster leadership roles.

Recommendation 2: Equity and working across population groups

Enhance UNHCR's approach to equity and needs-based programming across population groups with practical guidance for Country Offices to support consistent and equitable resource allocation and decision-making processes in country and regional plans and strategies, bearing in mind UNHCR's mandate for refugees.

Recommendation 3: Prioritization

Streamline Country Office decision-making on programming priorities by establishing a standardized process with transparent criteria. This approach should adapt to the unique needs and challenges of each operational context. Focus investments on impactful areas identified through this process, leveraging dedicated national cluster coordinators and continuous engagement in long-term initiatives like policy advocacy and evidence-based program design. Ensure strong strategic alignment with inter-agency priorities outlined in HRP/cluster strategies and UNHCR's specific contributions towards those goals.

Recommendation 4: Durable solutions

Implement clearer programme and thematic boundaries for UNHCR's role in durable solutions for IDPs. Provide UNHCR staff with consistent guidance on the intended scope and content of UNHCR's engagement in this area, with the aim of consolidating UNHCR's contribution to solutions for IDPs around its protection expertise. Beyond UNHCR's core area of competence in protection, set clear conditions and criteria for its engagement in solutions.

Recommendation 5: Learning and tracking results at outcome level

Enhance UNHCR's systems for results-based management with a consistent focus in all internal displacement situations on monitoring outcomes for IDPs in UNHCR's operations, including in multi-agency initiatives. Build into the system the means to track less visible results, including protection dividends of UNHCR interventions and results of UNHCR roles in convening, cluster leadership, advocacy and evidence provision.

Recommendation 6: Connectedness with other organisations

Build on UNHCR's progress in multi-agency approaches to internal displacement and resolve areas of tension at the international and country levels. Enhance ways of working with local organisations to support the localization agenda.

Recommendation 7: Resource mobilization

Enhance resource mobilization efforts for situations of internal displacement, both through communicating to current and potential donors about UNHCR's role in internal displacement situations and through addressing internal constraints to accessing some resource mobilisation opportunities.

Recommendation 8: Workforce management

Enhance UNHCR staff accountability, capacity, skills and expertise for internal displacement situations through training, guidance, recruitment and management processes.