# Evaluation of UNHCR's Repatriation Programmes and Activities 2015–2021

FINAL REPORT

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Conducted by:

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Itad Ltd.

## UNHCR Evaluation Service

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# Acknowledgements

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This report was written by Katie Tong, evaluation team leader, with inputs from core team members: Christine Kamau, Becka Kindler, Pierre Townsend, Andrew Lawday and Sarah Deardorff Miller.

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| Key information at a glance | |
|---|---|
| **Title of the evaluation:** | Evaluation of UNHCR's Repatriation Programmes and Activities |
| **Time frame covered:** | 2015–2021 |
| **Type of evaluation:** | Global, thematic (centralised) |
| **Evaluation manager:** | Henri Van Den Idsert, Snr. Evaluation Officer |
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# Executive summary

## About the evaluation

This document summarises the findings, conclusions and recommendations of the Independent Evaluation of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees' (UNHCR's) Repatriation Programmes and Activities 2015–2021. The evaluation was undertaken from March 2021 to April 2022.

By the end of 2020 there were 82.4 million people displaced worldwide; of these, 20.7 million were categorised 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 of UNHCR's repatriation programmes and activities 2015–2021 was commissioned primarily as a formative, learning exercise, with the intentions of reflecting on UNHCR's current support to voluntary repatriation and reintegration, identifying enabling and constraining factors within different operational contexts, documenting good practices, and contributing towards updating UNHCR policy and guidance on repatriation and reintegration.

The scope of the evaluation was set through the three aspects of geographical, temporal and thematic scope. Geographically, the scope was global and the evaluation sought to ensure a sufficient balance of breadth and depth across country, regional and global levels. The evaluation conducted in-depth case studies in six countries, including three countries of origin (Burundi, Central African Republic (CAR) and Colombia) and three countries of asylum (Iran, Republic of Congo (RoC) and Tanzania). Temporally, the evaluation covered the time period 2015–2021 but it includes a historical review of the relevant academic literature examining pre-2015 activities. Thematically, the evaluation covered repatriation activities across the areas that preceded safe and dignified voluntary repatriation, and then the areas of reintegration, rehabilitation and reconstruction, but with more focus on repatriation and reintegration.

## Evaluation methodology

The evaluation was designed in an iterative manner, using the terms of reference (ToR) as a foundation and then building on this with a series of inception phase scoping interviews and an inception document review. The overarching evaluation approach included a guiding framework for how UNHCR engages in repatriation, an evaluation matrix that built on this

framework, a range of data collection methods and tools to build the evidence base around the key questions, and an evidence assessment framework that the team used to analyse and synthesise the breadth of evidence gathered by the evaluation. In total, the evaluation team interviewed 181 stakeholders at country, regional and global levels, reviewed 382 documents, and engaged with 77 refugees over 10 focus group discussions (FGDs) in two countries. Additionally, 165 UNHCR staff responded to an online survey.

## Key findings

With regard to **relevance** of UNHCR interventions in support of voluntary return, the evaluation found that this was 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.

Of the two main operating models used to support voluntary return, promotion is no longer widely practised; by default, facilitation is the model most often deployed. Implicit in this latter model is the assumption that voluntary repatriation is part of a broader process of transition to peace. This assumption is problematic in situations of protracted crisis, where returns often occur more spontaneously outside of formal frameworks. In these situations, facilitation often fails to address the needs of a large number of returnees, who instead return by their own means.

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

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

With regard to **coherence** of UNHCR's approach to voluntary repatriation, the evaluation found that this 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 returns. 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. On a related subject, returnees often have limited leverage over the circumstances of their own return. The extent to which their voice is reflected in the design and implementation repatriation activities is relatively limited.

With regard to the **effectiveness** of UNHCR's approach to voluntary repatriation, the evaluation found that logistics and administrative tasks relating to facilitated returns are typically conducted in close adherence to established guidelines. These activities target only a relatively limited number of returnees, as they do not encompass refugees who return by their own means. Within their relatively narrow scope, these activities are generally viewed by stakeholders as efficiently carried out. The exception to this is information campaigns aimed at supporting refugee decisions, which would need to draw on more localised sources to be considered to be of real value.

In the area of reintegration, the effectiveness of UNHCR programming is constrained by a range of contextual factors, including shared accountabilities and a heavier reliance on long-term partnerships. For the most part, facilitated returns occur in situations of low risk. There is some evidence that when facilitation is suspended or scaled down for security reasons, refugees opt for the riskier option of returning by their own means, which are outside of formal repatriation frameworks. Thus, in the aggregate, facilitation displaces the risk to returnees but does not reduce it.

With regard to **coordination,** the evaluation found that UNHCR leadership and operational coordination have been effective in terms of organising the practical aspects of returns, including pre-departure assistance and support on arrival. There are also some good examples of forward leaning and proactive UNHCR leadership in the area of reintegration. These latter efforts have earned UNHCR some recognition, even if they are yet to culminate in conclusive results.

Regarding UNHCR efforts to engage development actors and catalyse their support for long-term reintegration, 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 the reticence of development donors. Challenges also remain in the collection and systematic use of operations-level data on repatriation and reintegration activities. This impedes institutional lesson-learning and is an obstacle to UNHCR's global leadership and pursuit of the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR) objectives.

With regard to **sustainability**, the evaluation found that the extent to which UNHCR has adapted repatriation and reintegration activities to become more sustainable is variable across countries of asylum and countries of origin. The financial, operational and policy burden of supporting the sustainability of returns 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.

In countries of origin, there is some evidence to suggest that sustainability in returns can be improved through a broad-based approach to reintegration support, encompassing returned refugees alongside other affected groups. As well as being easier to fund, this broader approach is likely to provide better opportunities for efficiencies and economies of scale in programme delivery.

## Conclusions

The evaluation drew five primary conclusions across the areas of relevance, coherence, effectiveness, coordination and sustainability. Firstly, with regard to **relevance**, the evaluation found that in a more complex and more diverse global environment, the operating models used by UNHCR for its voluntary repatriation and reintegration operations lack adaptiveness to specific contexts. The operational guidance available for reintegration support is limited.

The increased protractedness of crises has made it more difficult for many refugees to envision return as a feasible or desirable option, and rapidly increasing migratory flows in the latter half of the previous decade have strained the capacity of host countries globally and have often resulted in growing pressure for refugees to go home. In this more complex and diverse environment, voluntary repatriation and reintegration support require a level of adaptiveness to context which UNHCR's set models and approaches do not readily provide. Reflecting this, one of these models – promoted returns – is rarely used now. The other – facilitated returns – has become the default model for UNHCR's repatriation operations.

The evaluation found that in contrast with repatriation operations, for which well-established – if imperfect – models exist, UNHCR reintegration support does not draw on set operating models and is the subject of relatively limited guidelines or directions. Reintegration programming is at the outer periphery of UNHCR's traditional area of competence. In this area, UNHCR cannot as easily draw on its mandate to assert its leadership and authority. Its comparative advantage is more difficult to assert.

Secondly, with regard to **coherence,** the evaluation found that there is an inherent tension between (i) UNHCR's role in repatriation as part of a political process of transition and (ii) its protection objective of ensuring that refugee returns are voluntary, safe and dignified. This

tension hampers an operational understanding of voluntariness that fully captures the complexity of choices made by returnees and the constraints that come to bear on these decisions.

At their core, the challenges involved in these dynamics often relate to adverse conditions in countries of asylum, where, short of refoulement, obstacles to local integration can nonetheless be significant or overwhelming. In light of these considerations, the binary view of voluntariness that is generally conveyed in UNHCR policy and guidance is problematic. In fact, voluntariness from a refugee perspective is more about a scale of imperfect options in an environment of constrained choice.

Thirdly, with regard to **effectiveness**, the evaluation found that as promoted returns are no longer widely practised, facilitation has become the model most often deployed in repatriation operations. In most cases examined, this model is proficiently implemented, yet it is limited in its design and does not address the needs of the majority of returnees. In the area of reintegration, results have been constrained by highly adverse contextual factors and a lack of up-to-date guidance.

The processes involved in facilitation are well defined. Their focus is primarily on repatriation support per se; that is, they consist of activities carried out mainly before and during return and shortly after arrival. The success of facilitation hinges heavily on activities conducted in countries of asylum, where the legal basis for UNHCR operations is strong and its unique comparative advantage over other aid actors is well recognised. In the area of reintegration, impact-level results have been elusive, due in part to the broad timespan needed for these results to materialise.

Fourthly, with regard to **coordination**, the evaluation found that the effectiveness of UNHCR in the coordination of repatriation operations is widely recognised. Long-term reintegration support presents more significant challenges, which UNHCR has been slow to address.

UNHCR-led coordination is widely viewed as effective in the context of repatriation operations, which typically involve time-bound tasks, clear divisions of labour and well-defined objectives. However, in the programmatically more complex area of reintegration support, it was less immediately clear whether UNHCR coordination consistently yielded the desired results. Despite the overall limited success, there is evidence that system-wide cooperation in reintegration programming produces better results when based on mixed approaches that encompass both returned refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) as well as host communities. Conversely, a narrower status-based approach to reintegration may hamper broad-based cooperation and constrain the value added to joint interventions by each participant.

Lastly, with regard to **sustainability**, the evaluation found that opportunities to improve the sustainability of returns lie primarily in better and more broad-based partnerships and coordination across mixed caseloads of returnees. Although success in reintegration is widely understood to be at the core of voluntary returns as a durable solution, UNHCR programme practice and resource allocation continue to favour repatriation support over reintegration programming. At least in part, this bias speaks to UNHCR's protection mandate and to the fact that reintegration is at the periphery of its traditional area of competence. Although reintegration support is outside UNHCR's core area of competence, multiple respondents in the evaluation noted that among its key assets in catalysing stakeholder support in this sector are its capacity for data collection and its strong operational presence on the ground. UNHCR can support multi-partner interventions in this area by sharing programme data more proactively and by designing modalities for joint programme delivery that can draw on its strong operational footprint.

## Recommendations

The recommendations below follow from the conclusions and are grouped in five broad thematic areas.

### Normative framework, policy and guidelines

**Recommendation 1:** Attenuate the operational bias placed on voluntary returns by the formal statement, conveyed in UNHCR policy, that this solution is the most preferable for refugees, and place greater emphasis on contextual realities, returnee needs and the principles of voluntariness, safety, and dignity in assisted returns.

**Recommendation 2:** Update the 1996 Handbook on Voluntary Repatriation: International Protection and the 2004 Handbook for Repatriation and Reintegration Activities to reflect contemporary norms and policy orientations conveyed in the Global Compact for Refugees (GCR) and Strategic Directions 2022–2026[1] and to provide guidance on new approaches and tools.

### Operationalisation and programming

**Recommendation 3:** 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 who return independently, outside of formal repatriation operations, are accurately captured and reflected in assessments and programme design.

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[1] Referred to hereafter as *the Strategic Directions.*

**Recommendation 4:** Structurally enhance the participation of prospective returnees in decisions relating to their return.

**Recommendation 5:** Based on a more systematic assessment of contexts of return, including linking more information from refugees in countries of asylum (such as intention surveys) with monitoring activities in countries of origin, explore modalities for reintegration support that better accommodate the need of many returnees to retain some mobility post-return.

### Information management

**Recommendation 6:** Ensure that the information supplied by UNHCR to prospective returnees, in view of supporting their decisions on return, is more timely and more localised.

**Recommendation 7:** 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

**Recommendation 8:** Drawing on the framework set by the United Nations Secretary General (UNSG) Decision No. 2011/20, achieve better clarity on how the two distinct conceptions of Durable Solutions held by UNHCR and its development partners should be integrated at operational level, notably as regards shared leadership and the joint coordination of relevant programmes.

**Recommendation 9:** At country and regional levels, support the development of broader and better integrated multi-partner platforms.

### External relations, resource mobilisation and budgeting

**Recommendation 10:** Structure budgets and design funding instruments that support reintegration intervention spanning mixed caseloads of returned refugees, returned IDPs and local communities.

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# List of acronyms and abbreviations

| | |
|---|---|
| 3RP | Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan |
| 4Rs | Repatriation, Reintegration, Rehabilitation and Reconstruction |
| AAP | Accountability to Affected People |
| AGD | Age, Gender and Diversity |
| AGDM | Age, Gender and Diversity Mainstreaming |
| AIRD | African Initiatives for Relief and Development |
| AARREC | Agence d'Assistance aux Rapatriés et Réfugiés au Congo |
| AU | African Union |
| BAFIA | Bureau for Aliens and Foreign Immigrants' Affairs |
| CAAFAG | Children Associated with Armed Forces and Armed Groups |
| CAR | Central African Republic |
| CNAR | Comité National d'Assistance aux Réfugiés |
| CO | Country Operation |
| CPSS | Comprehensive Protection and Solutions Strategy |
| CRRF | Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework |
| CSO | Civil Society Organisation |
| DER | Division of External Relations |
| DIP | Division of International Protection |
| DLI | Development through Local Integration |
| DFAM | Division of Financial and Administrative Management |
| DRC | Democratic Republic of the Congo |
| DRS | Division of Resilience and Solutions |
| DSRP | Division of Strategic Planning and Results |
| ECHO | European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations |
| EQ | Evaluation Question |
| ERG | Evaluation Reference Group |
| ERM | Enterprise Risk Management |
| ES | Evaluation Service |
| ExCom | Executive Committee of the Programme of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees |
| FAO | Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations |
| FGD | Focus Group Discussion |
| GCR | Global Compact for Refugees |
| GIFMM | Interagency Group for Mixed Migration Flows |
| HLP | Housing, Land and Property |
| HQ | Headquarters |

| | |
|---|---|
| IADB | Inter-American Development Bank |
| IASC | Inter-Agency Standing Committee |
| IDP | Internally Displaced Person |
| IFI | International Financial Institution |
| IGAD | Intergovernmental Authority on Development |
| ILO | International Labour Organization |
| IOM | International Organization for Migration |
| IRC | International Rescue Committee |
| JRP | Joint Response Plan |
| JRRRP | Joint Refugee Return and Reintegration Plan |
| JRS | Jesuit Refugee Service |
| KII | Key Informant Interview |
| LGBTQI | Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and Intersex |
| MIRPS | Marco Integral Reginal par la Protección y Soluciones [Comprehensive Regional Protection and Solutions Framework] |
| NEPAD | New Partnership for Africa's Development |
| NFI | Non-Food Item |
| NGO | Non-Governmental Organisation |
| OAU | Organisation of African Unity |
| OCM | Office of the Chief of Mission |
| OECD-DAC | Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's Development Assistance Committee |
| PARR | Priority Area of Return and Reintegration |
| PoC | Person of Concern |
| PRIMES | Population Registration and Identity Management Eco-System |
| ProGres | Profile Global Registration System |
| PSN | Person with Specific Needs |
| PwD | Person with Disabilities |
| R4V | Inter-Agency Coordination Platform for Refugees and Migrants from Venezuela |
| ReDSS | Regional Durable Solutions Secretariat |
| RMRP | Refugee and Migrant Response Plan |
| RoC | Republic of Congo |
| RSD | Refugee Status Determination |
| SET | Senior Executive Team |
| SMC | Senior Management Committee |
| SOP | Standard Operating Procedure |
| SSAR | Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees |
| ToR | Terms of Reference |
| TPR | Total Protection Rate |
| UASC | Unaccompanied and Separated Children |
| UN | United Nations |
| UNAIDS | Joint United Nations Programme on HIV and AIDS |
| UNCT | United Nations Country Team |
| UNDAF | United Nations Development Assistance Framework |
| UNDP | United Nations Development Programme |

| UNFPA | United Nations Population Fund |
| UNHCR | United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees |
| UNICEF | United Nations Children's Fund |
| UNRWA | United Nations Relief and Works Agency |
| UNSDCF | United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework |
| UNSDG | United Nations Sustainable Development Group |
| UNSG | United Nations Secretary-General |
| WFP | World Food Programme |
| WGDS | Working Group on Durable Solutions |
| WHO | World Health Organization |

# 1. Introduction

This section introduces the evaluation and its purpose, objectives and scope.

## 1.1 Introduction and background

By the end of 2020 there were 82.4 million people displaced worldwide; of these, 20.7 million were categorised as refugees under the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees' (UNHCR's) mandate.[2] 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. While, in recent years, a number of complementary pathways towards solutions have been identified, these three primary durable solutions remain the foundation of refugee management. Within them, voluntary repatriation from a country of asylum and subsequent reintegration back into a country of origin has traditionally been globally articulated as the preferred durable solution, although this is increasingly being questioned with regards to, 'preferred by whom'? Identifying and implementing these solutions for refugees while ensuring their safety and dignity is a core function of UNHCR's mandate.

This evaluation of UNHCR's repatriation programmes and activities 2015–2021[3] was commissioned primarily as a formative, learning exercise, with the intentions of reflecting on UNHCR's current support to voluntary repatriation and reintegration, identifying enabling and constraining factors within different operational contexts, documenting good practices, and contributing towards updating UNHCR policy and guidance on repatriation and reintegration. This is all considered particularly in relation to UNHCR's responsibilities under the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF), which is an integral part of the Global Compact for Refugees (GCR). This report presents the findings, conclusions and recommendations of the evaluation, and is structured as follows: **Section 1** is an introduction, which outlines the purpose, objectives and scope of this evaluation; **Section 2** provides an overview of the methodology of this evaluation; **Section 3** presents the context – both the global policy and operating environment and a brief overview of UNHCR activities within that environment; **Section 4** presents the findings of this evaluation per evaluation question (EQ); **Section 5** provides conclusions; and **Section 6** provides recommendations.

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[2] See: https://www.unhcr.org/uk/figures-at-a-glance.html The remaining 61.7 individuals are internally displaced persons (IDPs), asylum-seekers, Venezuelans displaced abroad (and treated as a separate category) and Palestine refugees under the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) mandate. This evaluation focuses on voluntary repatriation and reintegration of refugees, and does not provide a separate analysis of UNHCR's work with IDPs.

[3] Note that the specified time period for this evaluation was 2015–2020; however, data collection began in August 2021, and naturally this included evidence against events and activities within 2021, which have been included as part of the data set and within the overall analysis.

The following documents are annexed to the report: (1) the terms of reference (ToR); (2) the guiding framework; (3) the evaluation matrix; (4) a full table of risks and limitations; (5) the full list of stakeholders interviewed for this evaluation; (6) a list of the documents reviewed; (7) a historical academic review; and (8) a summary of the online survey responses.

## 1.2 Purpose, objectives, and scope of the evaluation

The **purpose** of this evaluation is primarily formative and learning focused. It was designed to generate evidence, insights and learning around UNHCR's support to repatriation and reintegration activities 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.

The evaluation had four specific **objectives**:

- To support strategic reflection on UNHCR's roles and responsibilities in voluntary repatriation situations, and how it is reflected in UNHCR policy and translated into practice;

- To assess the effectiveness of UNHCR approaches to voluntary repatriation and reintegration across a range of contexts, and identify enabling and constraining factors to effective implementation;

- To generate evidence and insights around good practices and lessons learned on UNHCR's engagement in voluntary returns;

- To generate concrete and context-specific recommendations that can be used to guide and inform future UNHCR policy and practice, including contribution to reviewing and revising UNHCR's current guidance on voluntary repatriation and reintegration.[4]

The **scope** of the evaluation was set through the three aspects of geographical, temporal and thematic scope. Geographically, the scope was global and the evaluation sought to ensure a sufficient balance of breadth and depth across country, regional and global levels. The evaluation conducted in-depth case studies in six countries, including three countries of origin (Burundi, Central African Republic (CAR) and Colombia) and three countries of asylum (Iran, Republic of Congo (RoC) and Tanzania). Temporally, the evaluation covered the time period 2015–2021[5] but includes a historical

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[4] As outlined in UNHCR (2004) Handbook on Repatriation and Reintegration Activities and UNHCR (1996) Handbook on Voluntary Repatriation: International Protection.

[5] Note that the specified time period for this evaluation was 2015–2020; however, data collection began in August 2021, and naturally this included evidence against events and activities within 2021, which have been included as part of the data set and within the overall analysis.

review of the relevant academic literature examining pre- 2015 activities.[6] Thematically, the evaluation covered repatriation activities across the areas that preceded safe and dignified voluntary repatriation, and then the areas of reintegration, rehabilitation and reconstruction, but with more focus on repatriation and reintegration.

The primary users of the evaluation include UNHCR Headquarters (HQ), regional bureaux and country operations (COs). All other stakeholders included in repatriation, reintegration, rehabilitation and reconstruction activities – nation states, donors, other United Nations (UN) agencies, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), civil society organisations (CSOs) and networks, and academic institutions – are considered important secondary users. Refugees and returnees are unlikely to be direct users of this evaluation; nonetheless, they are considered critical stakeholders. Wherever possible, efforts were made to reflect the direct voices of refugees in the evaluation, but the feasibility of this was limited – see Section 2.4 on limitations.

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[6] This review examined historical (pre-2015) large-scale UNHCR-supported returns through an academic desk review. This was an additional piece of data agreed upon during the inception phase, through discussion between the evaluation team and the Evaluation Reference Group (ERG) based on concerns that the lack of current large-scale, promoted returns would be a significant data collection gap.

# 2. Methodology

This section presents the approach, methodology, case study selection and data collection processes for the evaluation. It provides an overview of the process and the tools used to define the evaluation and collect and collate data in a systematic manner, including the guiding framework, the evaluation matrix, and the evidence assessment framework. This section also provides an overview of the limitations of the evaluation.

## 2.1 Methodological approach

The evaluation was designed in an iterative manner, using the ToR as a foundation and then building on this with a series of inception phase scoping interviews and an inception document review.[7] The overarching evaluation approach included a **guiding framework** for how UNHCR engages in repatriation, an **evaluation matrix** that built on this framework, a range of **data collection methods and tools** to build the evidence base around the key questions, and an **evidence assessment framework** that the team used to analyse and synthesise the breadth of evidence gathered by the evaluation.

### *The guiding framework*

The guiding framework (see Figure 1 below) was developed by the team, based on engagement with UNHCR, to guide the framing of the evaluation. It sets out the four levels of UNHCR engagement in repatriation, as categorised in UNHCR policy documentation, and how these link to strategic and operational outcomes. The framework served to structure the evaluation and the EQs around key policy within UNHCR – such as the Strategic Directions – and external to UNHCR – such as the GCR. Secondly, during the analysis phase of the evaluation, it was used as a reference point to cross-check and validate emerging findings.

As shown in Figure 1, the guiding framework depicts the overall problem statement, and the activity, output and outcome pathways to achieving the overall objectives as framed in the New York Declaration (2016) and the GCR. Noting that voluntary repatriation is the only durable solution available founded on human rights, the linkages between the normative legal framework and UNHCR-supported repatriation activities and objectives are also depicted in the framework.

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[7] See evaluation inception report for a list of documents reviewed and individuals interviewed during the inception phase, and for a full overview of the methodology.

## Figure 1: Guiding framework for the evaluation

**Problem statement**

At the end of 2019 there were 26 million refugees in the world. The predicament of refugees is a common concern of humankind. Refugee situations have increased in scope, scale and complexity and refugees require protection, assistance and solutions. There is an urgent need for more equitable sharing of the burden and responsibility for hosting and supporting the world's refugees, while taking account of existing contributions and the differing capacities and resources among States. [*UNHCR website, Global Compact on Refugees*]

Note that repatriation is the only durable solution founded on human rights

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**STAKEHOLDERS:** Refugees themselves – both in countries of asylum and countries of origin. States. Humanitarian and Development actors. Host Communities.

**Repatriation scale from legal framework to operational realities**

Global legal framing….UNHCR policy….UNHCR guidance….UNHCR practice….Operational realities

**Repatriation trajectory from voluntary return to sustainable reintegration**

Protection activities required for safe and dignified voluntary repatriation; informed decision to return; assistance with return; reintegration – social services, education, health, shelter, livelihoods – links to development actors and state services

**LEGAL/POLICY FRAMING: 1951 Convention:** UNHCR's protection mandate derives from the 1951 Convention and its 1967 Protocol.

**GCR and CRRF:** in 2018, the United Nations General Assembly affirmed the Global Compact on Refugees, which is a framework for more predictable and equitable responsibility-sharing, recognising that a sustainable solution to refugee situations cannot be achieved without international cooperation.

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**Activities – levels of engagement**

**A:**
**Self-organised repatriation**

Provision of documentation, advocacy with relevant stakeholders, supporting re-establishment of national protection services, protection monitoring of returns

**B AND C:**
**Facilitated return, large groups/facilitated return, individuals or households**

Negotiating formal agreements with governments, securing guarantees for safe and dignified returns, providing repatriation grant/package, supporting reintegration programmes

**D:**
**Promoted voluntary repatriation**

Scaling up activities under B and C to include also provision of information and counseling encouraging return, engaging in return operations, integration-related mechanism under CRRF and GCR

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**Output results – linked to 5 strategic directions**

**PROTECT**
*Specifically*:
- Act as a strong advocate for the rights of refugees;
- Strengthen regional and national protection frameworks/capacities;
- Strengthen protection across the whole spectrum of forced displacement

**RESPOND**
*Specifically*:
- Strengthen an early focus on solutions;
- Formulate all assistance interventions with a protection and solutions orientation in mind

**INCLUDE**
Note: not a specifically relevant strategic direction for returns

**EMPOWER**
*Specifically*:
- Ensure that refugees, internally displaced and stateless people have access to reliable information as a basis for taking decisions about their lives;
- Actively pursue innovative ways to amplify the voices of the people we work for

**SOLVE**
*Specifically*:
- Give strong new impetus to our engagement with development actors and processes;
- Strengthen also our partnerships with political, security and human rights actors;
- Actively engage with national and regional peace processes/proactively support peacebuilding initiatives;
- Pursue voluntary repatriation for refugees;
- Actively support the reintegration of returnees

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**Outcome results**

**STRATEGIC DIRECTION**
UNHCR has an overarching strategy, policy and guidance to ensure repatriation and reintegration activities protect, respond to and empower refugees while attaining safe and dignified return to countries of origin as an ultimate durable solution

Linking UNHCR policy based on international legal/human rights framing with practical guidance for operational results within contextual realities

**OPERATIONAL RESULTS**
UNHCR repatriation strategy is implemented in a consistent, fair and dignified manner across complex and diverse contexts, with clear and measurable results of refugees returning, reintegrating and leading sustainable and self-reliant lives in countries of origin, as per GCR outcomes

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**Goal**

**New York Declaration, 2016:** Commitment towards solutions from the outset of a refugee situation, with a focus on sustainable and timely return in safety and dignity, encompassing repatriation, reintegration, rehabilitation and reconstruction activities

**GCR:** to ease pressure on host countries; to enhance refugee self-reliance; to expand access to third-country solutions; and to support conditions in countries of origin for return in safety and dignity

*The evaluation matrix*

Based on the guiding framework, the evaluation team developed a comprehensive set of EQs, sub-EQs, indicators and data sources to guide data collection and analysis. The overall EQs and sub-EQs are presented below and address the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development's Development Assistance Committee (OECD-DAC) evaluation criteria of relevance, coherence, effectiveness and sustainability, with an additional EQ on Coordination and GCR. The full evaluation matrix is presented in Annex 3.

**Table 1: Summary evaluation matrix**

| EQ | Sub-EQs |
|---|---|
| **EQ1. To what extent is UNHCR's support to voluntary repatriation and reintegration relevant in different contexts?** | 1.1 How appropriately has UNHCR provided timely support to refugees for return from countries of asylum?<br>1.2 How appropriately has UNHCR provided timely support to returnees when arriving in their country of origin?<br>1.3 How clearly defined have levels of support to repatriation (facilitated or promoted) and subsequent reintegration been articulated based on context and need?<br>1.4 How appropriate/relevant are the operational planning tools and processes utilised by operations to plan and implement assisted voluntary returns and reintegration?<br>1.5 How does UNHCR ensure repatriation is consistently voluntary, safe and dignified for all individuals, including women, men, boys, girls and other vulnerable and excluded groups, such as those with disabilities? |
| **EQ2. To what extent do UNHCR's policies and guidance translate into practical solutions for operational realities on the ground?** | 2.1 How well do UNHCR policies and operational guidelines translate the global legal framing of voluntary repatriation into specific practical guidance for country operations, including risks identified within the Enterprise Risk Management (ERM)?<br>2.2 How well suited are the ambitions of voluntary repatriation results, as stated in policies and guidelines, to be translatable to practice within different complex contexts?<br>2.3 How can UNHCR strengthen its operational guidance to support operations in their planning and implementation of repatriation and reintegration activities? |
| **EQ3. To what extent do UNHCR's different repatriation modalities effectively support repatriation and reintegration activities?** | 3.1 How effectively has UNHCR support to *self-organised voluntary return* assisted refugees in returning and reintegrating across countries of origin and countries of asylum? How do activities lead to results across the Strategic Directions of protect, respond, empower and solve? What are the key constraining and enabling factors?<br>3.2 How effectively has UNHCR support to *facilitated voluntary return* assisted refugees in returning and reintegrating across countries of origin and countries of asylum? How do activities lead to results across the Strategic Directions of protect, respond, empower and solve? What are the key constraining and enabling factors?<br>3.3 How effectively has UNHCR support to *promoted voluntary return* assisted refugees in returning and reintegrating across countries of origin and countries of asylum? How do activities lead to results across the Strategic Directions of protect, respond, empower and solve? What are the key constraining and enabling factors?<br>3.4 How effectively do UNHCR repatriation and reintegration activities integrate age, gender and diversity (AGD) considerations? |

| EQ4. To what extent is UNHCR able to leverage its lead role in the response to repatriation movements with relevant stakeholders to ensure reintegration activities as foreseen in the GCR are put in place? | 4.1 How effectively does UNHCR ensure assistance activities related to repatriation and reintegration are coordinated across the broader landscape of partnerships with other actors? |
|---|---|
| | 4.2 How well has UNHCR provided leadership to other actors across the humanitarian–development–peace nexus to ensure repatriation, reintegration and rehabilitation are both sustainable and a shared responsibility across states and actors? |
| | 4.3 What are good examples of UNHCR's engagement in multilateral assistance programmes for return operations? |
| | 4.4 To what extent are UNHCR national and regional operations able to project the repatriation needs to the level of global stakeholders? |
| | 4.5 How well has UNHCR projected refugee numbers and movements to provide leadership to planning and implementation activities for voluntary repatriation of refugees? |
| EQ5. To what extent has UNHCR adapted repatriation and reintegration activities to become more sustainable? | 5.1 How well has UNHCR reallocated resources to ensure repatriation and subsequent reintegration of refugees is sustainable, as highlighted in the GCR objectives? |
| | 5.2 How well has UNHCR advocated to states for reallocation of resources to ensure repatriation and reintegration for refugees is sustainable, as highlighted in the GCR objectives? |

## *Data collection methods and tools*

The evaluation was framed around a "6+4" methodology, involving in-depth data collection across six country case studies plus data collection at (i) global level, (ii) regional level, (iii) a survey and (iv) a historical academic review. The evaluation employed a range of data collection methods designed to complement one another and provide the most suitable mix of data sources to triangulate findings against each sub-EQ:

- **Document and literature review at country, regional and global levels.** These documents included: internal UNHCR operational and programme documents, evaluations and assessments; and external documents by other actors relevant to reintegration and repatriation activities.

- **Context analysis at country level.** For each country case study, a context analysis was conducted to provide background context within which UNHCR activities were assessed, and these formed part of the process to develop country-specific ToRs.

- **Historical large-scale returns study.** This is presented in full in Annex 7 and was conducted as an academic piece, based on document review only. It was an additional piece of data agreed upon during the inception phase, through discussion between the evaluation team and the ERG, based on concerns that the lack of current large-scale, promoted returns would be a significant data collection gap. The study looked at historical (pre-2015) large-scale UNHCR-supported returns through an academic desk review.

- **Semi-structured key informant interviews (KIIs) at country, regional and global levels.** The team interviewed a total of 181 individuals – 80 UNHCR colleagues and 101 external stakeholders – across global, regional and country levels (see Section 2.3 below).

- **Online survey.** The global online survey was administered to approximately 868 purposively sampled UNHCR staff with a protection and durable solutions job function and included both national (levels NOA–NOD), and international staff (levels P2–D1).[8] A full summary of the online survey responses can be found in Annex 8. This survey was developed through an abductive logic approach, whereby halfway through the data collection an initial, interim analysis was conducted of evidence collected to date, and the emerging themes and the emerging data gaps then provided the basis of development of the survey questions. In total, 165 UNHCR staff members responded to the survey.

- **Focus group discussions (FGDs) with persons of concern (PoCs) in selected countries.** While these were limited to Tanzania and Colombia only, due to COVID-19-related travel and gathering restrictions, the perspectives of refugees themselves in these two countries were important data points for this evaluation.

### *Country case studies*

The sample of case studies used for the evaluation was selected using a rigorous process, aimed at ensuring coverage of a variety of contexts and regions. The sampling criteria were derived from a data set of COs provided by UNHCR, divided into countries of origin and countries of asylum. The countries involved were ranked based on caseload size and then the following key criteria were applied, based on the quantitative data provided by the Evaluation Service (ES): (a) the number of returnees (only for countries of origin); (b) the number of refugees (for both countries of asylum and countries of origin); (c) the number of voluntary repatriation-related objectives 2016–2020; and (d) the budget 2016–2020 associated with voluntary repatriation. A long list of 19 countries of origin and 32 countries of asylum was provided to UNHCR. After initial consultations with the regional bureaux, and taking into account additional factors of prioritisation, workload burden, staffing issues, and other ongoing processes within COs, the final list of confirmed countries for the evaluation was as follows: countries of asylum – Iran, RoC, Tanzania; countries of origin – Burundi, CAR, Colombia.

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[8] The United Nations workforce is made up of different categories of staff. UNHCR staff that participated to the survey included the National Professional Officers (NO) category (NOA, NOB, NOC and NOD) as well as the Professional category (P2 to D1).

*Evidence assessment frameworks and MAXQDA*

For each of the six country data sets and the global, regional and historical data collection (both including document review and KIIs), an evidence database was created which collated all evidence from different sources, catalogued against specific sub-EQs. Part of the value of these evidence assessment frameworks was that they allowed for monitoring of where data gaps were emerging across countries as data collection continued, and this contributed greatly to the approach taken with the online survey, which was to develop questions based on emerging themes and emerging data gaps (see Annex 8). The evidence frameworks were also used to synthesise findings using MAXQDA software. This software allowed the team to code against EQs as well as themes and trends across the data sets.

**Table 2: Sample evidence assessment framework sample**

| Interviewer (initials) | Type of data (KII/FGD/Doc) | Interviewee/ document name | Background info | EQ1. To what extent is UNHCR's support to voluntary repatriation and reintegration relevant in different contexts? | | | | | EQ2, etc. |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | 1.1 Timely support from CoA | 1.2 Timely support to CoO | 1.3 Clearly defined levels of support | 1.4 Appropriateness of planning tools | 1.5 Ensure repatriation is consistently voluntary across AGD | |
| KT | Document review | Data 1 | | Data | | | | Data | |
| KT | KII | Data 2 | | Data | Data | | Data | | |
| KT | FGD | Data 3 | | | | Data | | Data | |

## 2.2 Stakeholder engagement

Within the inception phase, targeted UNHCR stakeholders from the Division of International Protection (DIP) and the Division of Resilience and Solutions (DRS), regional bureaux and COs and external stakeholders, specifically from the World Bank and the Regional Durable Solutions Secretariat (ReDSS, Horn of Africa), were consulted to contribute to the development of the evaluation framing. During data collection, the evaluation team consulted with a wide range of internal and external stakeholders at country, regional and global levels (see Annex 5 for a full list of stakeholders interviewed). Reflecting the evaluation team's commitment to engage directly with refugees, FGDs were conducted in two case studies: Colombia and Tanzania. Once the preliminary emerging findings had been assembled, a validation meeting with DIP and DRS was held in December 2021 to sense-check and test the initial evaluation findings. The ERG was consulted before the finalisation of the inception report as well as this synthesis report.

## 2.3 Data sources

In total, the evaluation team interviewed 181 stakeholders at country, regional and global levels, reviewed 382 documents, and engaged with 77 refugees over 10 FGDs in two countries. 165 UNHCR staff responded to an online survey.

**Table 3: Data sources by data set**

| Data Set | Documents | Interviewees | FGD # | Survey | TOTAL |
|----------|-----------|--------------|-------|--------|-------|
| **Burundi** | 25 | 29 | 0 | N/A | **54** |
| **CAR** | 42 | 20 | 0 | N/A | **62** |
| **Colombia** | 33 | 29 | 14 participants across 2 FGDs | N/A | **76** |
| **Iran** | 48 | 14 | 0 | N/A | **62** |
| **RoC** | 15 | 20 | 0 | N/A | **35** |
| **Tanzania** | 17 | 37 | 63 participants across 8 FGDs | N/A | **117** |
| **Global** | 72 | 22 | 0 | N/A | **94** |
| **Regional** | 49 | 10 | 0 | N/A | **59** |
| **Historical** | 81 | N/A | N/A | N/A | **81** |
| **Survey** | N/A | N/A | N/A | 165 | **165** |
| **TOTAL** | **382** | **181** | **77** | **165** | |

**Figure 2: Data sources by percentage**



Total data source by data set as percentage of overall evaluation data sources

- Burundi
- CAR
- Colombia
- Iran
- ROC
- Tanzania
- Global
- Regional
- Historical
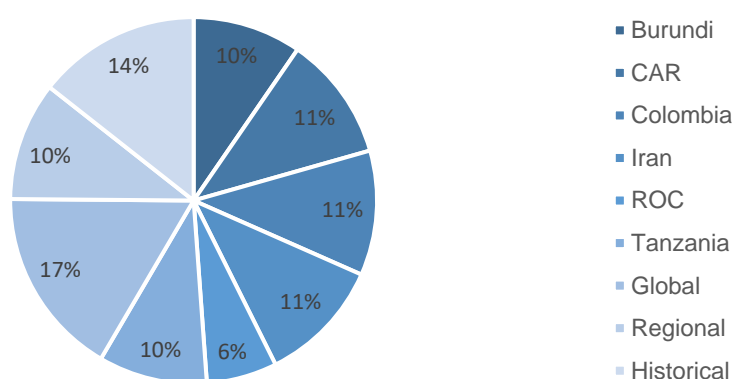
## 2.4 Evaluation limitations

With regard to the overall risks and mitigation measures, Annex 4 presents tables which highlight: the expected risks and mitigations; the effectiveness of those mitigation actions; and any other limitations,

not highlighted against specific EQ areas, that were unexpected but that arose throughout the data collection process. The main highlights of these limitations and mitigation successes are as follows:

- Disruptions due to COVID-19. The team recognised that this is an ongoing global risk, and within the inception report they outlined both (a) COVID-19 safety measures that would be in place across all countries and (b) a data collection spectrum for consideration against specific country COVID-19 contexts, dependent on each country context at the time. This risk did not significantly impact on the evaluation, in the sense that it was conducted in a similar way to all evaluations since the COVID-19 pandemic started in 2020.

- The thematic scope of the subject matter, which makes it difficult to capture and prioritise the most important findings. During the inception phase, the evaluation team tried to identify and delineate the boundaries of focus across the Repatriation, Reintegration, Rehabilitation and Reconstruction (4Rs) spectrum within the evaluation matrix. However, this remained a constant challenge throughout the data collection phase of the evaluation, and it did prove challenging during the analysis phase to prioritise the most critical findings focused specifically on repatriation and reintegration.

- The unavailability of key stakeholders, particularly those who were located in remote locations or areas of insecurity; and the limited time availability of respondents, or their lack of interest in the evaluation. The evaluation team had a systematic methodology for reaching out to global, regional and country-level stakeholders. This did remain a constant challenge throughout the evaluation, with all team members at some point struggling to reach and schedule meetings with key informants at all levels; but the team kept in constant contact with the ES, who provided significant assistance in connecting with key stakeholders.

Within the inception report, the evaluation team also presented an evaluability assessment whereby the team assessed – based on the inception document review and scoping interviews – the extent to which there is available evidence to address the EQs. Annex 3 presents a detailed table which presents both the original assessment of the level of data per EQ and the final assessment post data collection. The main highlights are as follows.

**EQ1: Relevance.** This was initially categorised as MEDIUM RISK, with the initial evaluability assessment suggesting evidence across global, regional and country-level documentation with regard to the question of relevance; and scoping interviews conducted suggest that many internal and external stakeholders have clear perspectives on what the issues and challenges are with regard to this question. Post data collection analysis, this EQ remained at MEDIUM RISK: overall there was strong evidence with regard to the relevance of UNHCR repatriation and reintegration activities, but

a lot of evidence provided by key informants was contextual background information rather than being specifically related to UNHCR activities.

**EQ2: Coherence.** This was initially categorised as LOW RISK, with the initial evaluability assessment finding that there is good evidence available across global, regional and country- level documentation relating to coherence. However, post data collection analysis this EQ was reframed as MEDIUM RISK: while all key informants had strong opinions on how policy relates to practice, this was often at the global legal-normative level of the 1951 Convention rather than being evidence of how UNHCR existing policies already translate that framework into practical guidance on the ground.

**EQ3: Effectiveness.** This was initially categorised as HIGH RISK, with the initial evaluability assessment finding that accessing concrete data on the effectiveness of UNHCR's support to different modalities, and ascertaining enabling and constraining factors that link to themes and trends useful at a global rather than country level, might be difficult to achieve. Post data- collection analysis, this EQ was reframed as LOW RISK: at country level, many examples of good practice were provided to show effectiveness (as well as barriers and hindering factors) at different levels and in different contexts across repatriation and reintegration activities.

**EQ4: Coordination and GCR.** This was initially categorised as LOW RISK, with the evaluability assessment suggesting that, given the clarity and structure of GCR and its objectives, there would be robust evidence for the targets against which this question is being measured. Post data collection analysis, this EQ was reframed as MEDIUM RISK: while there were many documents and key informants that spoke articulately and eloquently to the issues around GCR, it was difficult to extract evidence which was specific to the repatriation and reintegration processes from this, rather than overall opinions on the effectiveness of GCR in general.

**EQ5: Sustainability.** This was initially categorised as MEDIUM RISK, with the evaluability assessment suggesting that a combination of the burden-sharing framework – as outlined by GCR and then UNHCR documentation – and triangulation of key informant perspectives from sources both internal and external to UNHCR and survey responses would provide credible evidence to answer the question. Post data collection analysis, this EQ was reframed as HIGH RISK: the two sub-questions in EQ5 relate specifically to shifting resources (internally within UNHCR, as well as advocacy for states to shift resources) in line with the GCR objectives. It was challenging to find either documentary evidence or key informants who were able to speak to these questions with any authority.[9]

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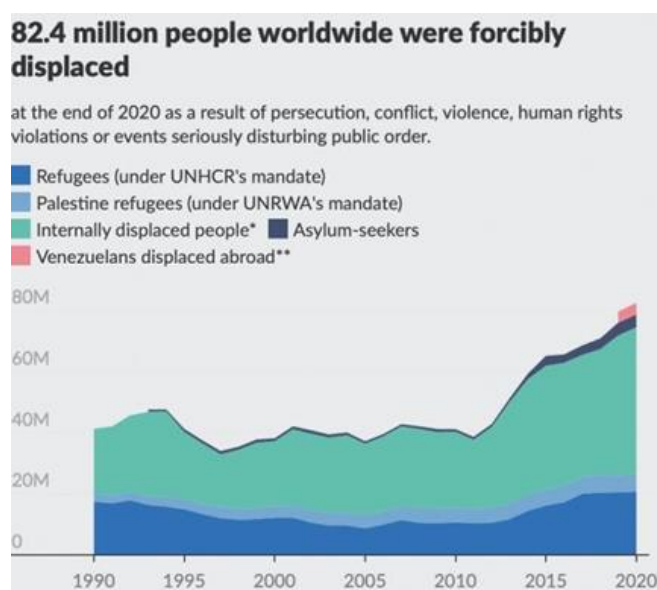[9] In part, this is due to the relatively recent development of the GCR and the CRRF.

# 3. Context

This section of the report provides an overview, first of the global legal and operational context for voluntary repatriation and reintegration and then, secondly, UNHCR's role and activities within this context. It is based both on a literature review and the experience of the evaluation team.

## 3.1 Global legal and operating context for voluntary repatriation and reintegration

As illustrated in Figure 3, refugee situations have increased steadily in scope and scale in the past decade. At the end of 2020, there were 20.7 million refugees worldwide.[10] An estimated 76% of them live in protracted situations[11] and 86% are hosted in developing countries.[12] As these numbers have grown in the past ten years, so has the political, security and humanitarian urgency of operationalising voluntary returns as a durable solution.

**Figure 3: Number of forcibly displaced people (1990–2020)**



**82.4 million people worldwide were forcibly displaced**

at the end of 2020 as a result of persecution, conflict, violence, human rights violations or events seriously disturbing public order.

- Refugees (under UNHCR's mandate)
- Palestine refugees (under UNRWA's mandate)
- Internally displaced people*   Asylum-seekers
- Venezuelans displaced abroad**

And yet, in the past three decades, the trend has been towards a sharp and steady decline in the global rate of refugee returns, from 15.3 million in the 1990s to only about 4 million in the last 10

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[10] Under UNHCR's mandate: UNHCR (2021) Global Trends – Forced Displacement in 2020.

[11] Protracted refugee situations are defined by UNHCR as situations in which more than 25,000 refugees from the same country, or origin, have been living in a country of asylum for more than five years. See: https://www.unrefugees.org/news/protracted-refugee-situations-explained/

[12] Ibid.

years.[13] In part, this downward trend is because of the increasingly protracted nature of conflict in the countries from which forced displacements originate.

The traditional view of refugee returns is that they are part of a predictable sequence of events that mark transition from conflict to peace. However, this conception has been increasingly challenged by realities on the ground. Transitions to peace are now widely acknowledged not to be linear but, rather, to occur iteratively, in fits and starts.[14] While repatriation operations do typically feature prominently in the plans provided for in negotiated peace processes, the majority of returns do in fact take place outside of agreed frameworks, in a way that is often much more ad hoc and haphazard than initially envisioned. As documented in this report, UNHCR's approach to assisting refugees in their return has yet to catch up with this reality.

In the context of negotiated peace processes, refugee repatriation signifies the end of conflict and the re-establishment of normalcy. In this sense, it forms a powerful political message that can belie the complexity of return processes on the ground. While it is common for peace agreements concluded in the last 25 years to contain provisions aimed at facilitating the safe and dignified return of refugees,[15] these provisions are often impeded by unforeseen obstacles. More often than not, repatriation is a highly unpredictable process, interlinked with thorny issues of security and human rights, and constrained by political, social, economic and environmental factors that are often not fully recognised in formal peace arrangements. The successful management of these factors is critical to ensuring the appropriateness and sustainability of refugee returns.

### *Legal framing*

The international refugee regime characterises repatriation as the most preferable of the three durable solutions.[16] Voluntary return is also the only durable solution enshrined in human rights law. From a legal-normative perspective, the right to return is fundamentally established in the Universal

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[13] UNHCR (2020) Global Trends – Forced Displacement in 2019; UNHCR (2021) Global Trends – Forced Displacement in 2020.

[14] See, for example, the OECD-DAC Guidance on Transition Financing, which states that "Transition is a non-linear process that presents tensions and trade-offs between the need to provide rapid support to peace-promoting and life-saving activities whilst supporting the development of sustainable state structures. As such, it requires a shared space between humanitarian, development and security actors, as countries might experience humanitarian emergencies, longer-term development programmes and peacekeeping efforts simultaneously." DAC International Network on Conflict and Fragility, International Support to Post-Conflict Transition, March 2012.

[15] See: https://www.e-ir.info/2016/03/03/refugees-as-contributors-to-peace-2/

[16] For example, see Section 3.1 of the Global Compact on Refugees: 'Voluntary repatriation in conditions of safety and dignity remains the preferred solution in the majority of refugee situations'. Global Compact on Refugees, United Nations, New York, 2018.

Declaration of Human Rights of 1948, Article 13(2), which states that "Everyone has the right to leave any country, including his own, and to return to his country".

Despite its firm legal basis, "the right of return has not figured prominently in general discussions of refugee rights. The major thrust of these discussions has been on the right not to be returned".[17] The 1951 Refugee Convention bans the forced expulsion of asylum-seekers and refugees (refoulement) but does not specifically address the question of 'voluntary' return or repatriation. The issue of 'voluntariness' is, nevertheless, emphasised in several of the later provisions that govern the international community's treatment of refugees and other displaced groups. Early documents such as the Statute of the UNHCR, and regional agreements such as the 1969 Organisation of African Unity Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa (OAU Convention) and the 1984 Cartagena Declaration, recognise repatriation as a key 'durable solution' to displacement, and emphasise that returns must only be undertaken voluntarily. Further, there have been three dedicated Executive Committee of the Programme of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (ExCom) Conclusions relating to voluntary repatriation specifically: ExCom Conclusion 18 (1980), ExCom Conclusion 40 (1985) and ExCom Conclusion 101 (2004). Within these three conclusions, the voluntary nature of return is addressed, and they cover such issues as: free and informed decision-making; provision of assistance to those who wish to return home; the promotion of conditions conducive to return; the facilitation of tripartite agreements; the requirement to meet specific needs; and the protection monitoring of returnees.[18]

*Recent trends*

The global number of forcibly displaced persons – refugees, asylum-seekers and internally displaced persons (IDPs) – now stands at over 80 million, increased from 41.2 million in 1990. The dramatic increase in that number relates primarily to displaced persons (from 2.5 million in 1990 to 48 million in 2020). The number of registered refugees, for whom UNHCR voluntary repatriation support applies, has increased at a much lower rate, from 17.4 million in 1990 to 20.7 million in 2020.[19]

As noted above, the rate of return for refugees has been steadily declining over the past three decades. This trend has become more pronounced in last five years. From 2020 onward, it was compounded by the partial or full closure of borders resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic.

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[17] Dowty, A. (1994) Return or compensation: The legal and political context of the Palestinian refugee issue. In World Refugee Survey 1994. U.S. Committee for Refugees, Washington D.C.

[18] See: https://www.unhcr.org/53b26db69.pdf

[19] These are numbers provided by UNHCR which include only registered refugees, not all asylum-seekers waiting for status determination, and for whom voluntary repatriation processes does not apply until refugee status is granted.

**Figure 4: Refugee returns by decade[20]**
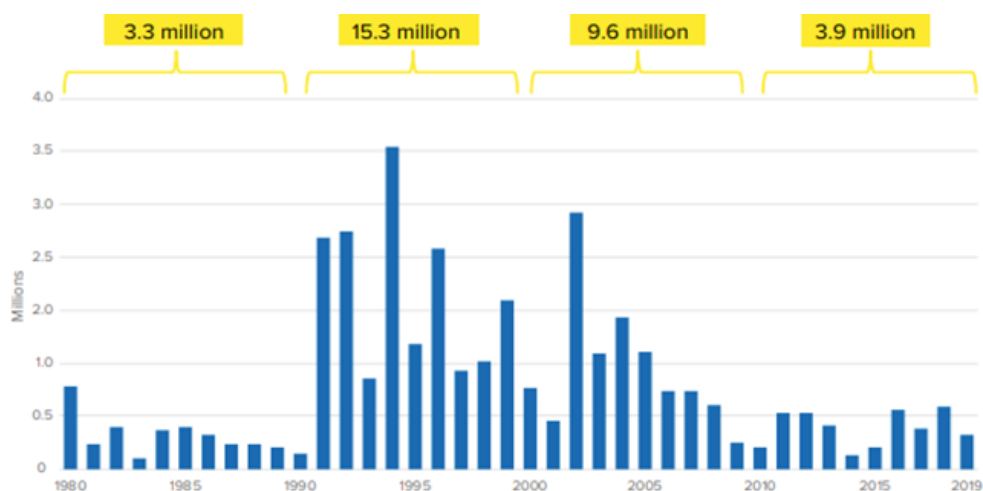


The combination of protracted conflict and increased mobility for other reasons, such as those driving economic and climate migration, has exerted mounting pressure on host countries. As noted above, almost all of these are in the developing world.[21] While the Total Protection Rate (TPR) – i.e. the percentage of asylum-seekers being granted some form of international protection, including refugee status – has remained remarkably stable over the last decade,[22] the international protection system currently in place for refugees has come under new strain. On the one hand, pressure has increased for forcibly displaced populations to return to their countries of origin[23] but, as illustrated in Figure 4 above, the rate of refugee returns has been falling sharply.

## The Global Compact on Refugees

With the affirmation of the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants in September 2016,[24] the Member States of the United Nations made a range of commitments to enhance the manner in which the international community addresses issues of human mobility: this included a CRRF and paved the way for the 2018 adoption of the GCR.

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[20] UNHCR (2020) Global Trends – Forced Displacement in 2019.

[21] 85% of refugees today are hosted in developing countries. Source: UNHCR (2020) Global Trends – Forced Displacement in 2019.

[22] In the past 10 years, the average global TPR has been 47.5%. It was at its highest from 2014 to 2016, when it almost reached 60%. It has otherwise fluctuated between 39% and 50%, and has stood at 44% and 46% in the past two years. Source: UNHCR (2020) Global Trends – Forced Displacement in 2019.

[23] For example, options for the large-scale repatriation Rohingya refugees were actively examined by Bangladesh, Myanmar and key donors in 2017. Likewise, the Lebanese government's efforts to repatriate Syrian refugees on its soil attracted international media attention in 2019. In the previous decade, repatriations from Pakistan, Afghanistan and Kenya all involved diverse forms of pressure. Source: Jeff Crisp, Repatriation Principles Under Pressure, Forced Migration Review, October 2019.

[24] See: https://www.unhcr.org/uk/new-york-declaration-for-refugees-and-migrants.html.

The GCR establishes the architecture for a stronger, more predictable and more equitable international response to large refugee situations. Although not legally binding, it guides the international community as a whole in supporting refugees and countries and communities hosting large numbers – including for extended periods of time – through the mobilisation of political will, a broadening of the base of support, and the activation of arrangements for more equitable and predictable burden and responsibility-sharing. It seeks ways to provide greater support to hosting countries and communities in a manner that supports refugee protection and the search for durable solutions; this support includes additional financial resources, but will also encompass political support, technical assistance, capacity-building activities, preferential trade arrangements, expanded access to resettlement and other third-country solutions, and efforts to address root causes and establish conditions in countries of origin that enable refugees to return home in safety and dignity.

An important part of this support relates to the nexus between humanitarian and development action; that is, the GCR seeks to enhance humanitarian responses while also providing a basis for the early activation of development cooperation to provide additional support with direct benefits for host communities and refugees.

The GCR provides a forum for engagement with a wider range of states and other partners that are ready to respond to large refugee situations, both new and protracted. It embraces a 'multi-stakeholder' approach, under national leadership, by strengthening existing partnerships and developing new ones. Partnerships between states, international and regional organisations, NGOs and the academic community will continue to be very important, but there is also great potential for partnerships with international financial institutions, the private sector, and many others.

The GCR also seeks to foster the resilience and self-reliance of refugees – in a manner that also benefits host communities – by facilitating access to livelihood opportunities and access to, and inclusion in, national systems and services, backed up by appropriate support from the international community. For refugees, this will mean that they are less dependent on aid, are better equipped to return home when conditions allow, and in the meantime can contribute to the communities that are hosting them. For those communities, this will mean that their own development does not suffer because of the generosity that they have shown to those in need.

The GCR has four primary objectives:[25]

- to ease pressures on countries that host large numbers of refugees;

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[25] See the website for Global Compact on Refugees for more information: https://www.unhcr.org/uk/the-global-compact-on-refugees.html

- to enhance refugee self-reliance;

- to expand access to third-country solutions (i.e. resettlement and complementary pathways for admission);

- to support conditions in countries of origin that enable refugees to return in safety and dignity. This is the objective that links directly to the subject of this evaluation: voluntary repatriation.

The GCR also established a Global Refugee Forum, at ministerial level, that brings the international community together every four years, starting from 2019, to focus on the challenges that refugees and host countries face, to broaden the range of actors that are engaged and providing support, and to review the collective progress that is being made towards more predictable and equitable burden- and responsibility-sharing.

The Forum is playing an increasingly important accountability function. In addition to providing for the making of new pledges, it allows states to take stock of the implementation of previous pledges and other progress towards the achievement of the objectives of the Global Compact, and to review the ongoing efficacy of the arrangements for burden- and responsibility-sharing. Stocktaking is informed by the GCR indicator framework, published in 2019 and composed of 15 indicators identified under eight outcomes linked to the four GCR objectives. The first GCR indicator report, published in November 2021, covers the years 2016 to 2021 and measures progress made towards the GCR objectives and their cross-cutting principle of burden- and responsibility-sharing.[26]

## 3.2 UNHCR activities for voluntary repatriation and reintegration

This sub-section outlines UNHCR activities within the policy and operating context as discussed above.

*UNHCR mandate and legal framework*

UNHCR's core mandate is to "ensure the international protection of uprooted people worldwide",[27] a fundamental core component of which is to ensure that refugees are not forcibly returned. General Assembly Resolution 428 (V) of 14 December 1950, adopting the UNHCR Statute and establishing the office of the High Commissioner states that voluntary repatriation is a core and statutory function of UNHCR in "seeking permanent solutions for the problem of refugees by assisting governments and […] private organisations to facilitate the voluntary repatriation of such refugees". As referenced above, the right of refugees to return to their home country is enshrined within the Universal

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[26] See the website on the Global Compact on Refugees for more information: https://www.unhcr.org/global-compact-refugees-indicator-report

[27] See: https://www.unhcr.org/uk/legal-protection.html

Declaration of Human Rights, Article 13(2), thus meaning that voluntary repatriation is the only durable solution embedded within the international legal human rights framework.

## UNHCR voluntary repatriation and reintegration guidance and programming practice

Guidance for UNHCR's repatriation programming and activities is contained primarily in two handbooks.

The *1996 Handbook on Voluntary Repatriation: International Protection*[28] is the overarching UNHCR guidance for all aspects of voluntary repatriation, including legal, conceptual and practical information and instructions. The handbook provides an overview of the legal mandate that UNHCR holds for voluntary repatriation, together with the protection content of voluntary repatriation, including relevant international human rights instruments. It provides an overview of UNHCR's specific role in the process of return and a clear and comprehensive step-by-step guidance to practical operational considerations. While this handbook does cover UNHCR's role within a country of origin, after refugees return it is focused more on the international protection framework of the process of return.

The 2004 *Handbook for Repatriation and Reintegration Activities*[29] has more of a focus on reintegration activities, framed around a conceptual model of the 4Rs Framework: repatriation, reintegration, rehabilitation and reconstruction.

These handbooks have formed the basis of UNHCR's support to voluntary repatriation and reintegration during the period covered by the evaluation (2015–2021) and in the years that preceded it.

## UNHCR's approach to supporting returns

UNHCR COs are based in the first instance on the status of PoCs, organised on the basis of the four pillars of refugees, statelessness, reintegration, and IDPs. Pillars 1 and 2 (refugees and stateless persons) are priority core mandate pillars, for which the provision of protection and assistance in any given context can be either to refugees in a country of asylum or to returnees in a country of origin, or to other population groups, such as IDPs.[30] Increasingly, this assistance is provided on an area-based approach, with the aim of reducing status distinctions between these groups.

UNHCR's support of voluntary return entails activities both in the refugees' countries of asylum and in their countries of origin. UNHCR will engage in these activities only when it considers that certain

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[28] UNHCR (1996) Handbook on Voluntary Repatriation: International Protection.

[29] UNHCR (2004) Handbook for Repatriation and Reintegration Activities.

[30] Pillar 3 relates to reintegration projects for returnees, and pillar 4 relates to IDPs.

objective conditions are present on the ground. Where this is the case, the activities carried out will generally conform to either one of two set approaches detailed in its 1996 Handbook:[31]

- **Promoted returns.** These large-scale repatriation operations aim to return the majority of refugees back to their countries of origin. They will only take place when UNHCR is satisfied that refugees can return in safety and dignity. They will, therefore, be preceded by an objective improvement of the situation on the ground, such as that signified by a peace accord, and will require adequate security guarantees on the part of the CO. Promoted returns will also require UNHCR's full and unhindered access to both refugees and returnees, as well as a formal commitment from all parties that they will respect the voluntary nature of returns. Where these conditions are met, they will be incorporated in a formal repatriation agreement between UNHCR and the governments concerned.

- **Facilitated returns.** This modality is preferred where refugees "indicate a strong desire to return and/or have begun to do so on their own initiative, even when UNHCR does not consider that, objectively, it is safe for most refugees to return."[32] Facilitated returns can take place even when conditions in the country of origin have not changed substantially. The only requirement for UNHCR's facilitation of these returns is that they should be voluntary. There is often a tripartite agreement in place for facilitated returns.

In practice, the circumstances in which returns take place often result in hybrid arrangements that draw from both promoted and facilitated approaches. For example, in the case of returns to the CAR, starting in 2019, tripartite agreements were signed which committed all parties to upholding core protection principles. However, adverse security conditions did not allow full-scale promoted returns, and instead led UNHCR to limit its support to facilitation.

It is also important to note that conditions in countries of origin are not the only factors that come to bear on the return of refugees. As documented in the evaluation findings, adverse circumstances in countries of asylum can also be a compelling motive for a refugee to return home. Where this is the case, returns can take place even if a lack of appropriate conditions in countries of origin will cause UNHCR to refrain from facilitating them on a significant scale. While some measure of facilitation is commonplace in these circumstances, it will often take place alongside spontaneous or self-organised returns that do not rely on any form UNHCR assistance. The protection dilemmas implied in self-organised returns are discussed in detail in the evaluation findings section below.

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[31] UNHCR (1996) Handbook on Voluntary Repatriation: International Protection.

[32] Ibid.

For promoted, facilitated and self-organised returns, the range of activities conducted or advocated by UNHCR will typically be as follows:

**Table 4: UNHCR support activities per type of return**

| REPATRIATION SUPPORT ACTIVITIES | Types of voluntary return | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | **Promoted** | **Facilitated** | **Self-organised** |
| **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** | ✔ | ✔ | ✔ |

✔ Systemically    ✔ To the extent possible[33]

In countries of asylum, UNHCR undertakes repatriation support interventions as part of a broader country programme that will typically span protection, including refugee status determination (RSD), as well as other possible sectors of activity such as education, health, camp management or livelihood support and economic inclusion.

In countries of origin, UNHCR conducts protection activities aimed at returnees as well as a range of interventions in support of their reintegration. In the context of countries of origin, UNHCR is increasingly taking on the catalytic role envisioned for it by the GCR, galvanising system-wide partnerships, including both UN, governments and other actors, to secure the know-how and resources needed for successful reintegration outcomes.

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[33] Conditions that make these activities possible include funding and agreements with hosting governments.

# 4. Findings

This section of the evaluation presents findings developed from an extensive analysis of all data sources. These data sources include: document review, context analysis, KIIs and (in select countries) FGDs for the six country case studies; document review and KIIs at regional and global level; a global UNHCR staff survey; and a historical academic review of previous promoted return operations. This section is structured around the five EQs, with a summary of findings presented under each EQ, and then each finding being presented in bold, followed by explanation and discussion.

## 4.1 EQ1: To what extent is UNHCR's support to voluntary repatriation and reintegration relevant in different contexts (relevance)?[34]

**Summary of findings**

The relevance of UNHCR interventions in support of voluntary 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.

Of the two main operating models used to support voluntary return, promotion is no longer widely practised; by default, facilitation is the model most often deployed. Implicit in this latter model is the assumption that voluntary repatriation is part of a broader process of transition to peace. This assumption is problematic in situations of protracted crisis, where returns often occur more spontaneously, outside of formal frameworks. In these situations, facilitation often fails to address the needs of a large number of returnees, who instead return by their own means.

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

UNHCR guidance on repatriation and reintegration is outdated and does not align well with key UNHCR policy adopted in recent years. The available guidance is also scant in the area of reintegration, despite the

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[34] Sub-questions are: 1.1 How appropriately has UNHCR provided timely support to refugees for return from countries of asylum? 1.2 How appropriately has UNHCR provided timely support to returnees when arriving in their country of origin? 1.3 How clearly defined have levels of support to repatriation (facilitated or promoted) and subsequent reintegration been articulated based on context and need? 1.4 How appropriate/relevant are the operational planning tools and processes utilised by operations to plan and implement assisted voluntary returns and reintegration? 1.5 How does UNHCR ensure repatriation is consistently voluntary, safe and dignified for all individuals, including women, men, boys, girls and other vulnerable and excluded groups, such as those with disabilities?

fact that this area is challenging and strategically highly significant. Notwithstanding this, the guidance provides an important – if – incomplete basis for programming and is widely consulted at country level.

**FINDING 1. A range of contextual factors affect the relevance of UNHCR's support to voluntary repatriation and reintegration. Most notable among these are the powerful political dynamics of repatriation operations, which typically take place in the context of negotiated peace processes. UNHCR continuously strives to insulate its humanitarian protection mandate from the pressures often placed up on it by governments. Despite these efforts, the inherent tension between the humanitarian and political finalities of repatriation often adversely impact the relevance and effectiveness of UNHCR activities in this area.**

While the tension between state political interests and the protection of refugees is inherent to many repatriation processes, it has become more challenging over time given the growing number of displaced persons globally. A prominent view in the academic literature is that voluntary return – and by extension UNHCR's role in this area – is driven more by the national interests of state actors than by humanitarian or protection concerns. In the context of peace processes, a common scenario identified in the literature is one in which countries of origin actively promote the return of refugees, as this signals normalisation and an end to hostilities; alongside this, countries of asylum often welcome the resulting opportunity for refugees to leave their territory. In this context, there is evidence of a risk that repatriation processes become dominated by powerful political dynamics, with the ultimate effect of producing unwanted outcomes in terms of protection.[35] The academic literature contains multiple critiques of UNHCR's performance in safeguarding the humanitarian integrity of repatriation activities in these highly politicised situations. A dominant view in this material is that UNHCR has often yielded too easily to the dynamics at play, to the detriment of refugees themselves.[36]

A finding of this evaluation is that those pressures continue to exist in varying forms. For example, respondents in the evaluation reported the presence of a coercive element in the return from Tanzania of Burundian refugees, which called into question the voluntariness of UNHCR-assisted repatriations operations.[37] According to respondents, refugees in Tanzania are generally aware of this country's

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[35] See Annex 7 for the full discussion on the academic debate, together with citations.

[36] For example, Turton and Marsden (2002) emphasise how mass returns are politically motivated, and Takahashi (1997) raises concern over UNHCR's emphasis on return as an objective over the objective of achieving the protection of refugees. Similarly, Harild, Christiansen and Zetter (2016) write that voluntary return schemes "often partially or fully forfeit the 'voluntary' dimension of return, working with various 'push' factors to urge people to leave the host country." A range of scholars have documented the use of 'push' factors by host governments to encourage refugees to return, including the drawdown of aid and restrictions on services. They question the use of push factors, asserting that they may be ineffective at best, and unethical at worst.

[37] Multiple respondents in Burundi and Tanzania.

history of constrained returns, some of them having been pressured to return to Burundi in 2012 before again fleeing their country.[38] In Iran, UNHCR has had to strike a balance between advocating on behalf of refugees and working collaboratively with government authorities. Most recently, the August 2021 takeover of the Taliban in Afghanistan has reignited a discussion on how best to achieve this balance. The Iranian government's publicly stated analysis is that the recent drawdown of international forces in Afghanistan is likely to bring stability to this country, allowing Amayesh (refugee status) card holders to start returning in larger numbers. However, while return continues to be the preferred solution by the Iranian government, the reality is that they acknowledged that it might not be possible in the current circumstances.[39]

In this context, several external stakeholders interviewed for this evaluation felt that UNHCR did not advocate strongly enough in support of the best interests of refugees.

> *"There is a concern about what side UNHCR is on. Are they doing their best to ensure bare minimum standards of protection or are they complicit in facilitating putting people at risk? The reality lies somewhere between the two."[40]*

Despite the misgivings expressed, a majority of informants in the evaluation showed a clear understanding of the tensions and challenges faced by UNHCR in continuously negotiating the balance between accommodating the demands of sovereign states and promoting the best interests of actual and prospective returnees.

There was a sense among respondents that evolving global conditions in recent decades have compounded this tension. Among the developments that were viewed as having the greatest relevance to how repatriation should be reframed to better reflect the current global context were the following:

a. the nature of conflicts, which are complex and more protracted;

b. the increasingly mixed characteristics of displaced populations, consisting of refugees, migrants and IDPs;

c. the increasingly varied reasons for displacement, which are distinct but not always unrelated to conflict, such as climate change and the loss of economic opportunity due to insecurity.

Against this backdrop, several scholars have argued that UNHCR's traditional view of voluntary repatriation as the preferred durable solution speaks to national interests and a desired restoration of

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[38] Ibid.

[39] Iran UNHCR and partner respondents.

[40] Global NGO respondent.

the status quo more than humanitarian, development or protection concerns.[41] Other academics contend that this preference has become part of UNHCR's organisational culture and is now embedded in its policy and operational guidelines, to the extent that it is pursued as a protection goal in its own right, independent of the actual needs or wants of refugees themselves.[42] The evaluation found some evidence that the promotion of voluntary repatriation over other durable solutions may in itself have influenced the evolving refugee system by undercutting political will for other solutions.[43] Overall, there was a sense among respondents that established repatriation practice relies on frameworks and assumptions that are not congruent with the realities of today's operating environments. These views were expressed alongside an expectation for UNHCR leadership in the reform and update of repatriation practice.[44]

**FINDING 2. In UNHCR's typology of returns, facilitated returns are the default modality under which UNHCR most often provides support. Promoted returns have become infrequent and are widely viewed as not conducive to voluntariness. Self-organised returns are most commonly practised by refugees yet elicit comparatively limited UNHCR support.[45]**

In five out of six of the case studies conducted for this evaluation, UNHCR was supporting facilitated returns (Iran, Tanzania and RoC as countries of asylum and CAR and Burundi as countries of origin). Colombia was the exception, in that UNHCR works predominately within a context of self-organised returns, although UNHCR in Colombia do support a few facilitated returns annually. The predominance of facilitated returns in the sample appears to reflect a broader trend; indeed, research conducted for the evaluation suggests that this form of return is the most widely practised globally. There is evidence that facilitated returns in the past two decades have become the default modality of support for UNHCR, as promoted and self-organised returns are problematic for a number of reasons detailed below.

Promoted returns have become infrequent, with none occurring within the last five years. For promoted returns that took place prior to this period, respondents and academic sources report significant concerns that this modality does not allow due consideration to be given to voluntariness and the actual intentions of individual returnees. One of the most studied Afghan return efforts, which began in July 1990, provides a good example of this. On that occasion, UNHCR gave returnees a

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[41] For example, see Turton and Marsden (2002).

[42] See Annex 7 for further discussion on this.

[43] Multiple global respondents and the literature review, for example LaRochelle (2020) An exploratory analysis of UNHCR's promotion of repatriation as the gold standard for refugees.

[44] Multiple global respondents.

[45] In many contexts, facilitated and self-organised returns occur simultaneously.

repatriation grant in exchange for the ration passbooks they used to access food assistance in their country of asylum. There is significant literature criticising this intervention, on the grounds that it placed refugees in front of a binary choice and gave them little latitude to consider their options. Citing this large-scale operation, Turton and Marsden (2002) argue that "*in assisting the mass return of refugees, UNHCR was responding more to the perceived political interests of its donors and host governments, than it was to the actual interests of the majority of its 'beneficiaries'."* Equally, academic research on returns to the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) between 2005 and 2009 show that protection considerations and individual choice were not key driving factors in the staging of large-scale promoted returns. During this period, which followed the adoption of a post-conflict reconstruction framework for DRC,[46] UNHCR justified its promotion of the return of Congolese refugees to DRC on the basis of "*change of circumstances"* in the country.[47]

In light of their potential for adverse outcomes, it is worth examining whether lessons have been learned on the conduct of large-scale promoted returns in the context of political transition or negotiated peace processes. The case of Côte d'Ivoire does suggest that remedial measures have been identified to mitigate the risks inherent in this modality. In 2021, UNHCR developed a *Comprehensive Solutions Strategy* for Ivorian refugees, which included recommendations on the application of cessation clauses.[48] The document presents comprehensive solutions, involving "*intensifying the promotion of voluntary repatriation and reintegration of Ivorian refugees*". Critically, the strategy also supports other avenues for refugees who do not wish to return after refugee status ceases, such as naturalisation or pathways to permanent residency in their current countries of asylum. This suggests that experience from previous promoted return operations has been reflected in an updated model, providing options and alternative pathways for those who do not wish to return.

With regard to self-organised returns (also referred to in this report as *spontaneous* returns), it is worth highlighting a core paradox. The evidence suggests that they are, by far, the form of return most widely practised by refugees globally. Despite their prevalence, however, desk research and interviews conducted for this evaluation showed that self-organised returns are often viewed as peripheral to UNHCR operations, and typically elicit modest responses at country level. The disparity between the prevalence of self-organised returns and the scale of protection resources allocated to them is perhaps the most notable sign of a lack of coherence in UNHCR repatriation practice. In large part, this disparity owes to the fact that self-organised returns often occur in conditions that are

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[46] The Framework was driven by the African Union (AU) and the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) and consisted of three phases spanning emergency, transition and development.

[47] See Annex 7 for further discussion on this.

[48] UNHCR (2021) The Comprehensive Solutions Strategy for the situation of Ivorian refugees including UNHCR's recommendations on the applicability of cessation clauses.

assessed by UNHCR to be suboptimal, and in which it will therefore refrain from lending active support to refugees wishing to return home. In these conditions, UNHCR must weigh the desire and intentions of refugees against confirmed risks to their safety and dignity. For example, UNHCR reports neither promoting nor facilitating returns to Syria in 2018, given that the situation there was not conducive to safe and dignified return.[49] That year, however, 210,900 refugees did return on their own.[50] Self-organised returns are, by definition, arranged by refugees themselves. An added challenge to UNHCR's provision of support in self-organised returns is that refugees often do not reach out to it and may reside beyond the scope of its protection monitoring activities. In addition, anecdotal evidence suggests that many self-organised returns are in fact temporary, raising questions on the status of the refugees concerned and on the most appropriate way to assist them.

Notwithstanding these challenges, the 1996 Voluntary Repatriation Handbook does state that UNHCR should facilitate voluntary repatriation "*when it is taking place spontaneously, even if conditions are not conducive to return.*"[51] More recently, the GCR in 2018 reasserted the need to support refugees in their return, even if these returns take place outside of formal repatriation operations.[52] The core issue underlying self-organised returns is that the comparatively large number of these movements suggests a substantive gap in the provision of support to returnees, who fall under the protection and solutions mandate of the High Commissioner as former refugees and are, in fact, in need of international protection. In the case of CAR, there is evidence that self-organised returns have exceeded the number of facilitated returns by about 350% since 2017.[53]

It is worth noting here that there are regional and country differences regarding the perceived relevance of the current modality of returns. In Africa, UNHCR respondents generally agreed that the distinction between these modalities is useful for internal purposes, although significant crossover exists in practice between the three types of returns identified. For example, in Mali, UNHCR was cautious not to encourage self-organised returns, yet did provide some level of facilitation of these

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[49] Within the UNHCR Comprehensive Protection and Solutions Strategy (CPSS) for the Syria Refugee crisis, February 2018, UNHCR articulated a set of protection thresholds that must be met for safe and dignified return to be possible; these conditions have not been met within the time frame of this evaluation.

[50] UNHCR (2019) Global trends: forced displacement in 2018.

[51] UNHCR (1996) Handbook Voluntary Repatriation: International Protection.

[52] "It is recognized that voluntary repatriation is not necessarily conditioned on the accomplishment of political solutions in the country of origin, in order not to impede the exercise of the right of refugees to return to their own country. It is equally recognized that there are situations where refugees voluntarily return outside of the context of formal voluntary repatriation programmes, and that this requires support." Global Compact on Refugees, United Nations, New York, 2018. (Note that this phrase precedes the GCR and was inserted based on it being already agreed text within ExCom Conclusions in 2004 and 2016.)

[53] Based on a comparison of facilitated and spontaneous returns between 2017 and 2020. Sources: UNHCR, Situation générale du rapatriement volontaire des réfugies centrafricains, 23 December 2021, and UNHCR, Dashboard rapatriements spontanés, 30 September 2020.

returns with cash grants despite the fact that conditions in Mali were not considered conducive to safe or dignified repatriation.[54] Likewise, in CAR, assistance was provided where possible to refugees who had returned by their own means, independently of whether this assistance might constitute a pull factor, and at a time when facilitated returns had been suspended for security reasons. In both countries, there is a significant effort to closely monitor the conditions of all those who have returned, whether or not these returns have been facilitated or were self-organised. In Latin America, distinctions between modalities of return are much less relevant and are rarely used. No returns have even been promoted in the region. There are limited facilitated returns, and cross-border population movements, including forced displacements, are managed regionally under successive declarations dating back to the Havana Convention in 1928.[55]

In light of the evidence gathered for this evaluation, there is a question on whether modalities to support returns are selected strictly on the basis of the best interest of returnees, or whether other, more practical considerations weigh on the choice of approach selected. The evaluation found that some regional bureaux have provided costing guidance to COs on how facilitated returns should be budgeted, based on indicative pre-departure, travel and reintegration costs across UNHCR operations in both countries of asylum and countries of origin.[56] On the whole, this guidance makes facilitated returns markedly easier to manage than other modalities, and may introduce a bias in the choice of this modality as the preferred option. Conversely, several respondents indicated that the scale of UNHCR support to self-organised returns was comparatively limited because it is more costly and more difficult to implement. This is discussed in further detail in Finding 10.

**FINDING 3. UNHCR's role and attributions are generally much better defined in countries of asylum than in countries of origin. Similarly, UNHCR's role is much more clear-cut in the area of repatriation than in the more complex area of reintegration. Reflecting this, repatriation operations in countries of asylum usually tap into areas of expertise over which UNHCR has a strong command. In contrast, reintegration support in countries of origin often takes place in a more challenging environment for UNHCR and calls for activities that are often outside its traditional areas of competence. In the pursuit of reintegration goals, UNHCR is more reliant on partnerships with development actors, whose outcomes are set in the long-term and have**

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[54] UNHCR respondents.

[55] The 1928 Havana Convention on Asylum, predating the 1951 Refugee Convention, relates to states' obligations and rights with regard to those seeking asylum.

[56] Noting, of course, that reintegration costs related to genuine, sustainable, complete reintegration – relating to long-term security of housing, livelihoods, and access to education and health – must be viewed as a shared responsibility across multiple actors.

**not yet yielded impacts at scale. Despite these challenges, area-based approaches to reintegration offer potential.**

By the nature of its mandate, UNHCR tends to deploy the bulk of its operational resources in countries of asylum, where its leadership and comparative advantage in refugee responses are well established. In these countries, the activities that UNHCR conducts to support refugees in their voluntary return can draw on expertise and programme capacity readily available as part of its broader operations. In the area of protection especially, these activities are essentially a continuation of activities aimed at the broader refugee caseload. Information campaigns and registration drives conducted as part of repatriation operations, for example, will span the entire refugee population, and draw on a relatively small fraction of staff and resources available for the wider country programme. In countries of asylum, UNHCR's comparative advantage and position of leadership in voluntary repatriation operations are further reinforced by its mandate and statute, which clearly spell out its responsibility to refugees, including in the organisation of their return.[57]

Accordingly, the evaluation found that UNHCR repatriation support activities conducted in countries of asylum were generally well run. They consisted mainly of output-level interventions relating to protection and benefited from UNHCR's significant programming know-how in this area. In Tanzania, for example, they included registration for repatriation, legal assistance, child protection services and assistance to persons with special needs, including the elderly.[58] In Iran, the range of repatriation activities was narrower in scope: it included counselling; the provision of cash grants and/or some non-food items (NFIs), including water; mobility assistance for those with disabilities; and overnight accommodation, if necessary, at the border for those who had chosen to return.[59] Independently of their scope and nature, the evaluation found that these activities benefited from a firm basis in UNHCR policy and legal doctrine, and usually tapped into UNHCR's core areas of expertise.

On the whole, the evaluation found that programme-level repatriation activities conducted in countries of asylum were performed in close compliance with well-established procedures. This does not mean, however, that the core objectives of safety, dignity and voluntariness in returns could be achieved and upheld throughout return and reintegration. Indeed, as discussed in an earlier finding, these core objectives hinge primarily on the broader circumstances in which returns are conducted, rather than on output-level interventions carried out as part of narrowly circumscribed repatriation operations.

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[57] Paragraph 1 of the UNHCR Statute of 1950 provides that UNHCR has the primary mandate of international protection of refugees and "of seeking permanent solutions for the problem of refugees by assisting Governments and, subject to the approval of the Governments concerned, private organisations to facilitate the voluntary repatriation of such refuges."

[58] Multiple Tanzania respondents.

[59] Multiple Iran respondents.

In particular, the evaluation found that the core objectives of return and reintegration support were notably harder to achieve in countries of origin than in countries of asylum. In countries of origin the legal status of returned refugees and, with it, UNHCR's efforts to assist in their long-term reintegration do not rest on a firm legal foundation. As noted in its 2008 Policy Framework and Implementation Strategy on Return and Reintegration, "*UNHCR does not consider itself to be a development agency, nor does it have the mandate or resources to sustain indefinitely its involvement in return and reintegration.*"[60] Independently of its mandate and statutory attributions, UNHCR's pursuit of reintegration goals in countries of origin is set in the long term and, given the still-fluid environments in which they typically take place, is necessarily harder to navigate.

Chief among the challenges faced by UNHCR in countries of origin is the fact that reintegration outcomes hinge on multisectoral interventions that span a range of sectors outside of its area of competence and relate more to development than to protection. The 2008 Strategic Framework, cited above, notes that successful reintegration requires "*enhanced partnerships*"[61] and convergent goals across a broad variety of stakeholders, so that the required know-how and resources might be secured. The evaluation found that this observation remains timely today. While UNHCR has entered agreements with key development partners such as the World Bank[62]and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)[63], the evaluation found that these arrangements are yet to lead to systematic joint programming in the area of reintegration. While some successful measures have been taken to establish platforms for cooperation between UNHCR and development actors in the area of reintegration, this cooperation is yet to translate into the mainstreaming of joint or convergent programme delivery.

A good and broadly representative example of this is provided in CAR, where UNHCR and UNDP have co-chaired the Working Group on Durable Solutions (WGDS) since its establishment in 2019. See Box 1 for more detail. While some successful measures have been taken to establish platforms for cooperation with development actors in the area of reintegration, the evaluation found that they have generally not yet led to meaningful programme convergence on the ground. The same lack of convergence was noted in Burundi, where the political and security context and recent years have constrained joint reintegration efforts, despite conscious efforts on the part of both UNHCR and its development partners to overcome these obstacles (see Box 4).

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[60] UNHCR (2008), Policy Framework and Implementation Strategy – UNHCR's Role in Support of the Return and Reintegration of Displaced Populations, Informal Consultative Meeting, 18 February 2008.

[61] Ibid.

[62] See, for example, the Global Joint Action Plan entered into in 2017 by UNHCR and UNDP.
[63] UNHCR, UNDP, Partnership on Forced Displacement, published by UNDP, 2021.

> **Box 1: Good practice on UNHCR partnerships with development actors**
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> The evaluation team found an example of good practice in establishing partnerships with development actors in CAR, where UNHCR and UNDP have co-chaired the WGDS since its establishment in 2019. At inception, the WGDS suffered from sharply distinct definitions of the term Durable Solutions as put forward by the two co- chairs. UNHCR's interpretation of the term is that which is traditionally articulated in its legal doctrine, and which forms a key pillar of its overall protection framework.[64] In contrast, UNDP advanced a definition of the term that derives from the UNSG's Decision No. 2011/20 on Durable Solutions, which applies equally to IDPs and refugees.[65] The resolution of these differences required the intervention of the Resident Coordinator/Humanitarian Coordinator and the drafting of new ToR for the WGDS. In this regard it is notable that the separate bodies of guidance on Durable Solutions issued at global level by UNHCR and UNDP[66] cover markedly different areas and do not reference each other.
>
> Once these differences were resolved locally, members of the WGDS began to engage in an ongoing dialogue which was widely viewed as constructive by informants. Despite this progress, however, other hurdles in CAR have impeded system-wide cooperation and programme-level convergence on collective outcomes in reintegration. Here again, the case of CAR is representative of a generalised situation, in which obstacles to cooperation are essentially those typically associated with barriers to the humanitarian–development nexus and are by now well identified in research literature on the subject. They relate to different programming cultures, practices and planning cycles among humanitarian and development actors, as well as to the limited operational presence of the latter on the ground and the comparatively limited donor funding available for long-term reintegration support interventions. In addition to these obstacles, typical challenges often faced by UNHCR and other actors in their efforts to support reintegration include continued insecurity as well as weak state capacity for governance and basic service provision.

While system-wide partnerships remain a challenging pathway to reintegration, a more promising avenue may present itself with the localised approach involved in area-based programming. In Colombia, area-based reintegration projects supported by UNHCR were generally viewed as a success by respondents in this evaluation. The fact that that these interventions cover both returned refugees and IDPs is notable, as this allows UNHCR to leverage whole-community projects to meet the needs of all PoCs rather than requiring a more confined approach, which would be more costly and more difficult to implement.[67] Further, legalisation of informal settlements allows that the settlement is recognised as a neighbourhood rather than as a returnee settlement, which allows for state-supported housing, public services and infrastructure improvements.[68] Respondents noted that

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[64] This conception of durable solutions is articulated around three main types of solutions, consisting of (a) Voluntary Repatriation, (b) Resettlement, and (c) Local Integration. For further information see, for example, UNHCR Global Refugee Forum Factsheet, Solutions, 2019.

[65] UNSG Decision No. 2011/20 – Durable Solutions: Follow-up to the Secretary-General's 2009 report on Peacebuilding, 4 October 2011.

[66] This guidance was issued by UNDP in its capacity as global cluster lead for Early Recovery, and essentially aims to support the implementation of UNSG Decision No. 2011/20.

[67] Multiple Colombia respondents.

[68] Ibid.

area-based interventions have been key to providing protection assistance at community level.[61] Notably, UNHCR's project aimed at the legalisation of informal settlements in Colombia has been able to strengthen communities effectively so that they can manage the projects themselves, achieve the formal recognition of returnee settlements and, in turn, request institutional support for these locations (i.e. housing, public services, neighbourhood improvement).[69]

**FINDING 4. Despite being outdated, UNHCR's handbook on voluntary repatriation is widely consulted, and is welcomed by staff for the guidance it provides on the practical aspects of repatriation operations. In their implementation, repatriation activities adhere closely to this guidance. More generally, UNHCR return and reintegration activities draw usefully on dedicated or programme-wide tools available globally or at country level.**

As noted earlier, a majority of UNHCR respondents reported that they consider the 1996 voluntary repatriation handbook[70] relevant and useful, due mainly to the overview which it provides of the legal framework for returns and to its practical guidance on the protection dimension of repatriation processes. It is important to note, however, that these favourable views are mainly from a programme staff perspective; that is, they relate primarily to the *feasibility at output level* of the guidance provided, rather than to its appropriateness or long-term contribution to outcomes. In the case of CAR, most staff stated that they had consulted the 1996 handbook and its 2017 draft iteration extensively.[71] Indeed, the sense emerged in interviews that a key indicator of success in related activities was the extent to which they conformed to the existing guidance. Accordingly, the evaluation found that the processes involved in repatriations to CAR aligned closely with the handbook's prescriptions. Related to this, a prevalent perception among external respondents in CAR was that UNHCR was adept at the process aspects of repatriation operations but was not always able to situate these operations in their broader strategic context, in view of achieving their alignment with collective outcomes in peacebuilding and reintegration.

Likewise, in Iran, respondents reported referencing the 1996 handbook to check for compliance to process: "*I think the old handbooks are still quite valid. The voluntary repatriation handbook is our bible.*"[72] It should be emphasised that these favourable views relate primarily to output-level repatriation activities prior to departure, as well as in transit and shortly after arrival. As discussed

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[69] Operations Plan Colombia 2020; multiple Colombia respondents.

[70] Note that the 2017 updated draft was not widely referenced by UNHCR colleagues, being cited only by colleagues in CAR and one regional bureau.

[71] UNHCR (2017, August) Draft Voluntary Repatriation Handbook, Version 3. This handbook has not been circulated externally.

[72] Iran respondent.

earlier, the evaluation found that there remains a critical gap in actionable guidance in the area of reintegration support.

In general, the evaluation found that UNHCR tools and operational processes used in return and reintegration are functional, but with some scope for improvement. In an online survey, a majority of UNHCR respondents (see Annex 8) agreed that selected tools used in repatriation support are generally useful. The notable exception to this is COMPASS, UNHCR's results- based management platform, the recent introduction and ongoing rollout of which may explain mixed responses from respondents, with a sense among some that it requires better integration. Many respondents found the ProGres[73] tool useful, while others suggested that training sessions for the use of these tools would be beneficial. Needs assessments, voluntary repatriation forms and intention surveys were all considered useful.

**Figure 5: UNHCR perceptions of the usefulness of UNHCR tools for voluntary repatriation**[74]
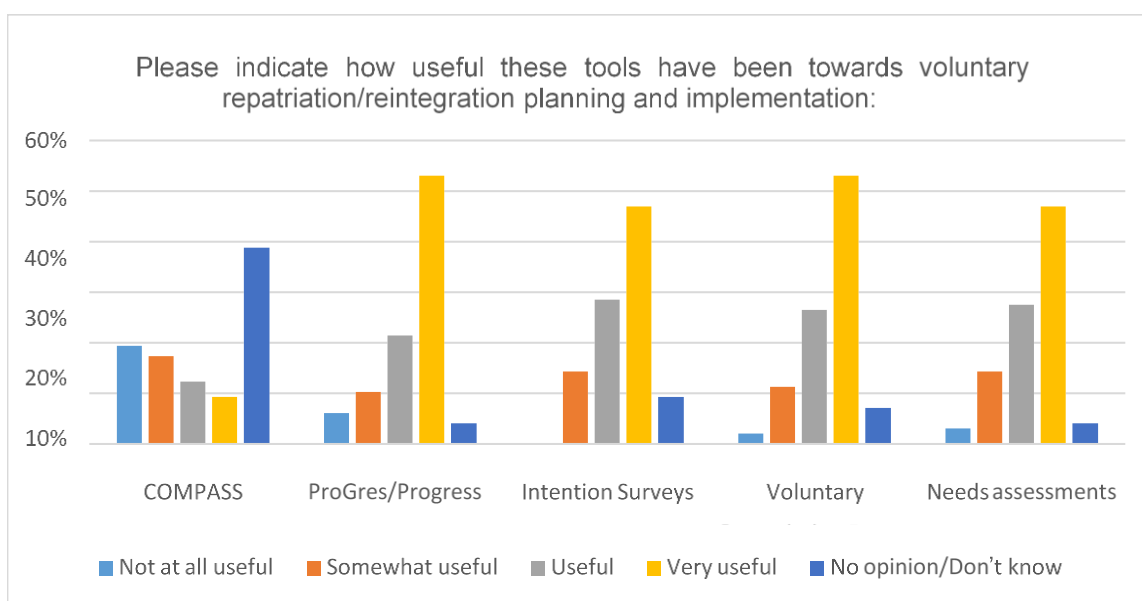


With regard to planning and programme practices relating to return, intention surveys are commonplace and were cited widely at country and regional levels by both UNHCR and NGO partner respondents.[75] 'Go and see' visits were notably more infrequent, due in part to their greater organisational demands and the need to align all stakeholders on the modalities involved. In Tanzania, for example, visits were meant to start in July 2021, but have been postponed as modalities

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[73] UNHCR developed an IT case management tool called ProGres (Profile Global Registration System) in 2002, which provides a common source of information about individuals that is used to facilitate protection of PoCs. ProGres is the main repository in UNHCR for storing individuals' data.

[74] Survey respondents.

[75] Multiple country and regional-level respondents.

have yet to be agreed. In the case of Iran, 'go and see' visits to Afghanistan have occasionally taken place in recent years but are no longer supported. There is the sense from several stakeholders that these visits would not in fact encourage voluntary returns but rather deter them, although this also highlights the fact that refugees have a more accurate understanding of the conditions within the origin country (even if a negative view), thus allowing them to make a more informed choice.[76]

The evaluation found that tools and guidance have varying levels of relevance across COs. In Colombia, for example, the Population Registration and Identity Management Eco-System (PRIMES)[77] is now used to register returned refugees alongside other PoCs in a specific area. Although this enables a more accurate picture of localised protection and assistance needs, the relevance to returned refugees is limited, given the small number of voluntary repatriation cases in the country. In general, respondents in Colombia viewed UNHCR guidance as lacking on the design of programme processes to achieve programme integration and efficiencies in mixed population contexts.[78] Conversely, guidance was also viewed as lacking on how to extend tools, practices and capabilities in use for IDPs and other PoCs, so that they might be applicable to returned refugees.

**FINDING 5. UNHCR operational guidance on repatriation and reintegration does not reflect the dichotomy between repatriation and reintegration as distinct fields of activity, nor provides appropriate directions on how to address it. This guidance is no longer up to date, and does not adequately capture the realities of today's operating environments.**

Most of UNHCR's guidance on repatriation and reintegration is over 15 years old and was released at a time when the context was very different from today. This guidance consists primarily of its 1996 Handbook on Voluntary Repatriation[79] and its 2004 Handbook for Repatriation and Reintegration Activities.[80] The evaluation found that some country offices also consult a draft 2017 update of the 1996 handbook,[81] even though it is still in draft form and is yet to be broadly disseminated.

The two published handbooks mentioned above provide clear and succinct guidance and are readily consulted by field personnel (see Finding 4 above). Problematically, however, they are objectively obsolete, and may therefore perpetuate practices that are no longer in line with contemporary policy or today's operating environments. An example of this is the lack of any reference in the handbooks

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[76] Multiple Iran respondents.

[77] PRIMES is used for all UNHCR registration and identity management tools and applications: https://www.unhcr.org/registration-guidance/chapter3/registration-tools/

[78] Colombia UNHCR respondents.

[79] UNHCR (1996) Handbook – Voluntary Repatriation: International Protection.

[80] UNHCR (2004, May) Handbook for Repatriation and Reintegration Activities.

[81] UNHCR (2017, August) (Draft) Voluntary Repatriation Handbook.

to approaches and opportunities provided by new outreach tools, including social media and digital platforms. This is despite the fact that outreach to prospective returnees is recognised as critical to successful outcomes in voluntary repatriation. The evaluation also found that some of the models, assumptions and premises put forward in the handbooks were no longer aligned with recent developments and contemporary narratives on reintegration. For example, the 4Rs Framework, used in the 2004 handbook as a basis for reintegration programming, assumes a linear trajectory to recovery, but this has now been widely disproved.[82] It is also notable that the guidance makes only cursory reference to area-based programming, and for obvious reasons does not tap into the substantial operational know-how which UNHCR has acquired in this area over the past two decades.

As noted in an earlier finding, the 1996 and 2004 handbooks make no reference to the definition of Durable Solutions put forward by development actors, which limits the ability to support implementation of UNSG Decision No. 2011/20. The lack of guidance on how to establish programme pathways between UNHCR's understanding of Durable Solutions as a protection-driven paradigm and UNDP's development-oriented articulation of the concept may partly explain the lack of progress in UNHCR's efforts to achieve substantive partnerships in reintegration support.

The obsolescence of the 1996 and 2004 handbooks also manifests in the fact that they do not capture or reflect recent developments in UNHCR's own policy and strategy. For example, while the Strategic Directions make a resolute step towards a more refugee-centred approach, and place inclusion, participation and the empowerment of assisted populations at the centre of UNHCR's activities, these values are not salient in the 1996 and 2004 handbooks. Although the handbooks do mention that UNHCR should try to involve refugees in repatriation decisions wherever possible, it puts limited emphasis on this objective and offers little practical advice on how to achieve it. The sense that emerges from the guidance overall is that it places more value on process compliance, and on the adherence of repatriation activities to established normative frameworks, than on their responsiveness to more individualised refugee needs and intentions at local level.

The Strategic Directions reflect the broader humanitarian sector's overall shift in recent years towards a more accountable, participatory and inclusive approach to programming. They are, in this sense, highly timely and up to date. The same cannot be said of other UNHCR policy and strategic orientations that come to bear on return and reintegration support. For example, the 2003 Framework

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[82] See, for example, the OECD-DAC Guidance on Transition Financing, cited earlier. For further discussion on this subject, see also Chapman *et al.*, Synthesis of Country Programme Evaluations Conducted in Fragile States, DFID, February 2010, or Hearn, Independent Review of the New Deal for Engagement in Fragile States, Center on International Cooperation, April 2016.

for Durable Solutions for Refugees and Persons of Concern[83] contains prescriptions that are either no longer valid, such as the 4Rs Framework cited above, or that need to be brought up to date with current knowledge and practice. The latter is true of the Development through Local Integration (DLI) approach proposed in the 2003 Framework, which in some ways can be viewed as a precursor to the area-based model.[84] While the broad principles laid out in the DLI remain generally valid, a lack of detail and specificity in these principles makes it difficult to apply them at operational level. The knowledge gained by UNHCR since the publication of the Framework would today allow it to review the approaches proposed in the document and to achieve a significantly greater level of detail in related guidance.

Overall, the evaluation found that the 1996 and 2004 handbooks do not address the sharply distinct contexts and conditions in which UNHCR usually conducts repatriation operations on the one hand and reintegration support interventions on the other. As detailed in the previous finding, the circumstances – legal, statutory, contextual – in which UNHCR typically engages in these two areas are profoundly different. They tend to make repatriation operations markedly easier to conduct than reintegration support interventions in countries of origin.

Most notably, the guidance overlooks the fact that in any given context, overall reintegration support in countries of origin is rarely exclusive to refugees or conducted by UNHCR alone. As a result, it is largely silent on how to approach mixed returns or to engage at field level with aid actors involved primarily in the return of IDPs, in line with UNSG Decision n. 2011/20. While the guidance does provide commentary on system-wide frameworks such as the United Nations Development Assistance Framework (UNDAF), it lacks specific instructions on how to operationalise these frameworks on the ground. For obvious reasons, it provides no commentary on the developments that have occurred in the UNDAF and United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (UNSDCF) in recent years.

The 2003 Framework, cited above, highlights the following 'critical success factors' for durable solutions:

- ownership by host governments of the processes which the 4Rs concept embodies;

- integrated planning process at country level by the United Nations Country Team (UNCT);

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[83] UNHCR (2003, May) Framework for Durable Solutions for Refugees and Persons of Concern, Core Group on Durable Solutions.

[84] The DLI approach was meant primarily for application in countries of asylum. It does not reflect the general sense, formed since by stakeholders, that programme-level reintegration approaches, tools and know-how can apply equally to both countries of asylum and countries of origin.

- strong institutional cooperation and commitment to support punctually and, at decisive moments, efforts of country teams to bridge essential gaps in transition strategies;

- participation of the plethora of actors who form part of the development community – United Nations agencies and bilateral and multilateral institutions.[85]

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**Box 2: Good practice on adapting reintegration models to today's operating environments**

In Colombia, the context has enabled UNHCR to take the lead with a mixed approach, with some good results. The evaluation identified good practice in Colombia regarding UNHCR's strategy to provide assistance to Colombian refugees, and returnees in general, through the adoption of a comprehensive solutions and protection strategy, which the evaluation found has been an appropriate approach given the context in Colombia. The strategy has provided enough flexibility for the country operation to react to on-going operational needs. Through its comprehensive protection and solutions strategy, UNHCR Colombia has prioritized an area-based protection approach which seeks to respond to all PoCs within a community. Given the Colombia context and its mixed movements, this decision to balance its support to Colombian refugees and returnees regardless of status was the most appropriate. In fact, both external and internal stakeholders commented that this was the only approach possible, as differentiating between different PoCs would have resulted in arbitrary distinctions and the exclusion of people in need of UNHCR support. UNHCR deemed it neither possible nor desirable to make distinctions between different PoCs within the same area when providing assistance or protection, as issues faced by Colombian refugees and returnees were similar to those experienced by IDPs and Venezuelan refugees. These included issues of land tenure, housing and income generation. As such, the area-based approach of the strategy is considered most appropriate by stakeholders.

Furthermore, to respond to the needs of Colombian refugees and returnees within this area-based approach, UNHCR has been able to appropriately adapt some of its long-standing programmes that were originally focused on the IDP situation. For example, its legalisation of informal settlements intervention was modified in order to comply with the characteristics of the mixed protection and solutions strategy so that all new interventions would not only focus on IDPs and host communities but also refugees and Colombian returnees. Since 2019, UNHCR and its partner Opción Legal have worked with local authorities to prioritise areas where the legalisation of settlements will benefit all PoCs as well as host communities. As noted by one informant:

*'We aren't going to distinguish between, say, Pillar 1 or Pillar 4, but rather take an area-based approach to benefit all the population of concern, as the same issues are there for IDPs, refugees, returnees. The situation in Colombia is complex, so the idea is to have this fluid approach where we can open cases for all PoCs, which in turn will help strengthen the whole community. Our legalization project is one of the best examples of this, which was originally focused on IDPs. These projects have been going for 10 years or so but now we are opening up the cases to benefit Venezuelan refugees and Colombian returnees.'* [86]

Although the context is very specific in Colombia, there are some lessons that can be drawn on how to adapt reintegration models to today's operating environments that would be useful for other operations.

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[85] UNHCR (2003) Framework for durable solutions for refugees and persons of concern.

[86] Colombia UNHCR respondent.

The above makes clear that an understanding of the necessity of partnerships has existed within UNHCR for nearly two decades. However, many respondents to this evaluation highlighted that UNHCR has still not achieved a model for coherent reintegration support that aligns with that provided by other actors.[87] One of the clearest indications of this are the challenges often encountered in the handover of UNHCR reintegration programmes to government or development partners. UNHCR policy indicates that handover should normally take place three years after refugees have returned;[88] in practice however, UNHCR reintegration efforts often continue well past this timeframe.

The evaluation found that a key requirement for workable model enabling joint programming would be to accommodate the reality of mixed refugee/IDP returns, and to allow for the need for shared leadership and collective outcomes in reintegration programming. As detailed in the previous finding, some progress has been achieved towards this at the governance level, with the establishment of such platforms as the WGDS in CAR. However, this should now extend to harmonised modalities for funding and programming.

In this area, some lessons might be drawn from Colombia, where UNHCR has deployed a strategy to assist a mixed caseload of refugees, returned refugees and IDPs. This uses an area-based approach and has involved the adaptation of long-standing programmes aimed originally at IDPs exclusively. Admittedly, Colombia is a distinct context where UNHCR's lead role in return and reintegration support may not be fully replicable to other situations. Nonetheless, it does provide a picture of what success looks like in area-based programming aimed at mixed populations. See Box 2 for more detail.

**FINDING 6. UNHCR guidance on Age, Gender and Diversity (AGD) specific to repatriation is sparse. Nonetheless, AGD considerations are reflected in a rudimentary manner in most repatriation activities. In the area of reintegration, there are broader, more deliberate and more innovative examples of how AGD is factored into programme delivery.**

Survey responses (see Figure 6) were divided on whether returns are safe and dignified for those with different needs,[89] as called for by UNHCR AGD guidance. The evidence from the country case studies also reveals significant differences in the extent to which AGD considerations are applied to return and reintegration activities across different contexts.
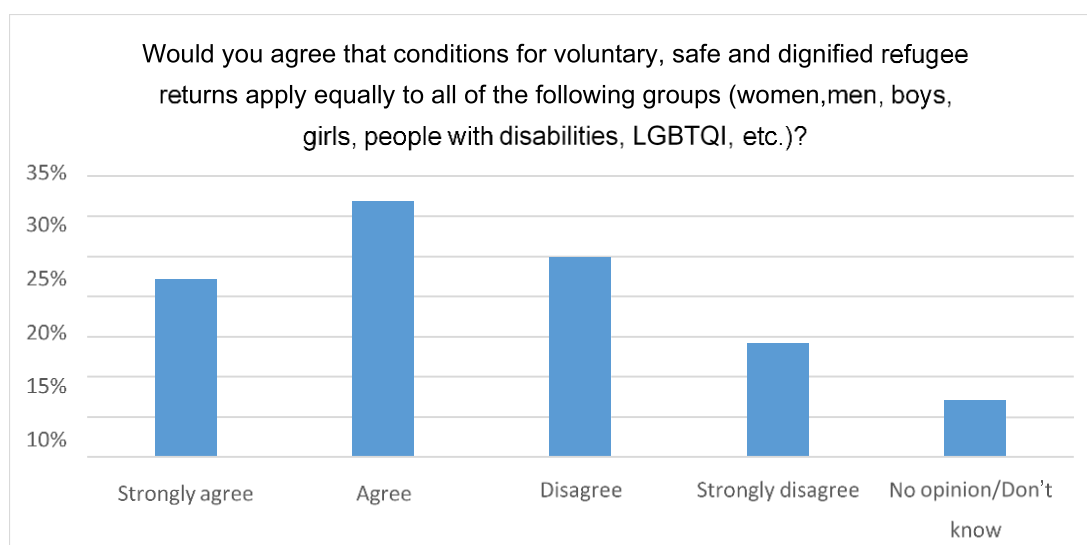
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[87] Multiple respondents at country and global levels.

[88] UNHCR, Policy Framework and Implementation Strategy – UNHCR's Role in Support of the Return and Reintegration of Displaced Populations, Informal Consultative Meeting, 18 February 2008.

[89] Taken here to include women and girls, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex (LGBTQI) individuals, and persons with disabilities (PwDs), etc.

**Figure 6: UNHCR perceptions of AGD with regard to voluntary repatriation**[90]



Would you agree that conditions for voluntary, safe and dignified refugee returns apply equally to all of the following groups (women, men, boys, girls, people with disabilities, LGBTQI, etc.)?

*AGD within countries of asylum for voluntary repatriation activities*

In general, the evaluation found that in countries of asylum, AGD considerations are generally applied in a consistent but rudimentary manner to repatriation support activities. Guidance in this area is limited in the 1996 handbook,[91] which predates UNHCR's growing attention to the subject. In some contexts, UNHCR respondents highlighted that AGD is integrated into voluntary repatriation as it is in all other areas of activity:

> *"AGD has been mainstreamed into all our programming and participatory assessment, and there is not anything particular about voluntary repatriation that makes it different from any other interventions. These aspects are mainstreamed." [92]*

Other respondents articulated different perspectives. For example, donors interviewed for this evaluation pointed out that AGD considerations are very visible in resettlement processes and are clearly embedded in multiple sectoral activities which support local integration. They were more unclear how AGD is applied specifically to voluntary repatriation, both in terms of providing appropriate support to those who require it and of informing their decision to return. They highlighted the difficulties involved in providing dedicated support to women and girls in the context of their

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[90] Survey respondents.

[91] In the draft 2017 handbook there is a much-expanded chapter on addressing the specific needs of refugees; it covers both the unaccompanied and separated children (UASC) population group already referenced in the 1996 handbook and also children associated with armed forces and armed groups (CAAFAG), women and girls at risk, older refugees, PwDs, LGBTI refugees, and youths.

[92] UNHCR regional respondent.

households, recognising that individual perspectives can be hard to discern and to act upon within a household unit:[93]

> *"It is a complex question, whether return is an individual or a household choice, and whether we can or should focus on the individual level. How do we deal with the definition of voluntary repatriation being the best solution for people going home, if that is not the best solution for each individual within a household? It is a philosophically interesting question."[94]*

Some interviewees highlighted that there is clearly a gendered and diversity-based dimension to return, with powerful examples of what this means in practice. In Iran, the context is largely defined by the complexities of ensuring that repatriation is genuinely voluntary for all members of the household. A significant gender issue in this regard is that in some cases, the return of adolescent girls is clearly motivated by the intention of their families to marry them in Afghanistan.[95] More generally, women and girls within households were reported to have limited choice and a constrained understanding of agency or voluntariness:

> *"Females in Afghanistan do not have a choice – they have to follow their parents or husband. We cannot even consider that return of females to Afghanistan is any manner voluntary."[96]*

In other countries of asylum, the evaluation found that AGD in repatriation activities was generally addressed with efforts to provide appropriate services. In Tanzania, for example, gender-disaggregated shelters and child-friendly spaces have been set up at the centres where returnees gather prior to departure, along with wheelchair-friendly walk spaces and dedicated sanitation facilities for persons with specific needs (PSNs).[97] Across the countries examined, efforts to address AGD-specific requirements pre-departure and in transit were generally more basic, but met the most critical needs.

### *Age, gender and diversity within countries of origin for voluntary repatriation activities*

The evaluation noted that challenges can arise where AGD considerations are subject to the authority of a third party. For example, there have been cases where local authorities have insisted on the return of UASC without best interest assessments being conducted prior to their departure, which can hamper their processing upon arrival. In other instances, cases have been reported of

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[93] Donor respondents.

[94] Donor respondent.

[95] Iran UNHCR respondents.

[96] Iran UNHCR respondent.

[97] Multiple Tanzania respondents.

unaccompanied and separated children (UASC) either wishing to repatriate or to stay, contrary to the intentions of their guardians. In those cases, UNHCR's policy is, as far as possible, to reunite families, but the wishes of individuals ultimately determine the preferred outcome. Supporting the position that individual preferences should ultimately inform repatriation outcomes is the piloting of special measures, which address vulnerabilities specific to sexual and other minorities in certain contexts. In Colombia, for example, UNHCR has made attempts to ensure that repatriation is consistently voluntary, safe and dignified for all individuals, regardless of their AGD characteristics. To do so, it has established a procedure that enables operations in countries of asylum to expedite voluntary repatriation, based on specific risk and vulnerability criteria.

In the area of reintegration, the evaluation found that much more consistent consideration is given to the provision of appropriate and timely AGD support. Reintegration support is set in the long term and generally provides more favourable conditions for the mainstreaming of AGD-specific practices as a part of measures applied across country programmes as a whole.

In Burundi, for example, UNHCR repatriation and reintegration plans made provisions for PSNs and targeted vulnerable groups with specific assistance. The Joint Response Plan (JRP) 2017–2018 prioritised assistance to women, children, and young and marginalised people. In 2021 the Joint Refugee Return and Reintegration Plan (JRRRP) interventions were informed by an age, gender and diversity mainstreaming (AGDM) methodology.[98] Implementation relied on UNHCR partners such as World Vision International, whose activities targeted persons with disabilities (PwDs), older people, people with chronic diseases, and women at risk. These groups were supported in transit centres and return areas, with the provision of dedicated transport, advice and referrals to state structures, and cash assistance.[99]

In Colombia, respondents viewed UNHCR as a pioneer in the way it addressed the particular needs of women and children. They noted that UNHCR has actively advocated for differentiated treatment of women and children and has taken specific measures to meet their needs.[100] However, a gap was noted in UNHCR's response to the needs of older adults who are returning from Venezuela. Returnees in this group have been living outside the country for many years, and many are struggling to validate their qualifications and work experience. In this context, it was perceived that UNHCR

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[98] Multiple Burundi respondents.

[99] Ibid.

[100] For example, as leaders of the Working Group on Migrant and Refugee Children, UNHCR led the development of eight safe spaces for Venezuelan children, including those with Colombia nationality, in Riohacha, Maicao, Bogotá, Cúcuta and Barranquilla. The Office also printed and distributed the child-friendly material 'Mi Viaje', designed at the end of 2017 to help displaced children, including second-generation Colombians, make sense of their experience. Operations Plan Colombia 2018.

needed to focus more on addressing the specific needs of this group.[101] The CO has recently introduced a new monitoring matrix, which enables the disaggregation of programme data by AGD category, in order to highlight and better address these requirements.

## 4.2 EQ2: To what extent do UNHCR's policies and guidance translate into practical solutions for operational realities on the ground (coherence)?[102]

**Summary of findings**

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 returns. Notably, multiple respondents in the evaluation had reservations as to whether voluntary returns should continue to be referred to as the preferred durable solution for returnees.

On a related subject, returnees often have limited leverage over the circumstances of their own return. The extent to which their voice is reflected in the design and implementation repatriation activities is relatively limited.

**FINDING 7. Both within UNHCR and among external stakeholders, there were misgivings on whether UNHCR policy and guidance accurately capture the aspirations and best interests of refugees. Notably, there were consistent calls to reassess whether voluntary returns should continue to be referred to as the preferred durable solution.**

At country, regional and global levels, a notable number of respondents in this evaluation expressed reservations about the formal position promoted by UNHCR, which holds that voluntary repatriation is the most preferable of the three Durable Solutions. This position is captured in a 2017 United Nations General Assembly Resolution, as well as in a series of UNHCR Executive Committee Conclusions.[103] It is also incorporated in the text of the 2018 GCR and, more recently, in the 2021 GCR Indicator Report.[104] Over the years, this position of principle has developed into an operational working assumption that measurably informs planning and programming, and which therefore impacts UNHCR outcomes on the ground. For example, in UNHCR's Global Strategic Priorities 2020–2021,

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[101] Multiple Colombia respondents and male and female FGD participants.

[102] Sub-questions are: 2.1 How well do UNHCR policies and operational guidelines translate the global legal framing of voluntary repatriation into specific practical guidance for Country Operations, including risks identified within the ERM? 2.2 How well suited are the ambitions of voluntary repatriation results as stated in policies and guidelines to be translatable to practice within different complex contexts? 2.3 How can UNHCR strengthen its operational guidance to support operations in their planning and implementation of repatriation and reintegration activities?

[103] A/RES/72/150, para 39; ExCom Conclusions Nos.: 90 (LII) (2001), (J); 101 (LV) (2004); 40 (XXX-VI) (1985).

[104] GCR, in UNHCR (2021) Global Compact on Refugees: Indicator report.

two of the four priorities relating to Durable Solutions are geared to return; the indicator for one of these sets the goal of achieving 40 situations of voluntary return where conditions permit.[105]

Where this position is articulated in UNHCR policy documentation, it is invariably accompanied by the proviso that returns should take place in the appropriate conditions. Nonetheless, the misgivings expressed by respondents centred on the fact that the 'right' conditions for UNHCR-supported returns are hard to define and measure. In the absence of set criteria and minimal standards for voluntariness, safety and dignity, there were concerns that UNHCR might come to support repatriation arrangements that compromise on these three conditions in view of achieving high rates of refugee returns. This was especially true in instances where repatriation objectives were formulated in the form of numerical targets, as in the case of Tanzania (discussed earlier) or that of the GCR Indicator Report cited above.

Some respondents noted that in positing voluntary return as the preferred solution, the language used in UNHCR policy documents does not indicate which of all stakeholders involved view it as preferable. As discussed in an earlier finding, voluntary returns are often a pressing priority for political stakeholders in negotiated peace processes, as they signify normalisation and a return to the *status quo ante*. There is evidence to suggest that the position of refugees themselves is more complex. While many – or even most – may feel an idealised yearning to return home, an equally high number might, in any given context, give primary consideration to more immediate and more practical concerns, such as those relating to their security or livelihoods. In light of these concerns, they will opt to forego their hopes of return and will instead prioritise other options, such as integration in their countries of asylum or onward migration to third destinations. In this respect, an indication of global refugee intentions might be found in the downward trend in repatriation since 2016.[106] While the slower rate of returns in the past five years is due, in part, to the increasing protractedness of crisis, it is also because of the related fact that many refugees in the current global environment will likely tend to prefer solutions to their displacement other than return. This is especially true of the younger age segments in protracted refugee caseloads that span multiple generations.[107]

In Iran, for example, the notion of 'returning home' does not apply to second and third- generation Afghan refugees in the same way as for their forebears. As noted by multiple respondents, these younger refugees know very little about Afghanistan.[108] There was a sense among respondents that more guidance was needed on how to interpret and safeguard the notion of voluntariness in these circumstances. In the case of Afghan refugees in Iran, the complexity of decisions surrounding

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[105] UNHCR (2021) Global Strategic Priorities 2021.

[106] Ibid.

[107] Multiple internal and external respondents.

[108] Multiple Iran respondents.

repatriation is highlighted by the relatively high incidence of second-generation refugees who return voluntarily for the sole purpose of obtaining a passport and an Iranian student visa, which they need to access further education in Iran. Likewise, in other contexts such as CAR and RoC, the often temporary or tentative nature of returns reflects a gradual and prudent approach on the part of refugees – part of carefully thought-out risk mitigation strategies that belie the notion of returns being a simple case of 'going back home' and resuming life as before.

The evaluation found that the need for interconnectedness between durable solutions was recognised in some contexts. In RoC, for example, UNHCR facilitated the repatriation of refugees from CAR and DRC, as part of a broader and more open-ended approach in which solutions are understood to be interlinked, non-exclusive, and adaptable to the context. In practice, the CO prioritised voluntary repatriation as the default solution.[109] Alongside this, however, it viewed and supported local integration as a possible intermediary step toward eventual repatriation. The CO also recognised that some refugees may pursue 'alternative pathways' to solutions, which may involve temporary returns and 'circular' shuttle movements across the border, as described above. Programme provisions were made for all these scenarios.[110]

Likewise, in Colombia, the notion of solutions advanced in UNHCR policy and guidance does not closely align with local realities. Three key features of the context are worth highlighting in this regard. First, cross-border and internal movements in Colombia are mixed and, with regard to returns, often indistinguishable from each other. Second, refugees and asylum-seekers make up a relatively small proportion of UNHCR's total caseload in Colombia although, as per the explanatory notes on the Venezuelan situation, the majority of Venezuelans leaving their country are refugees;[111] returns to areas of origin take place on scale far greater than that involved in cross-border repatriation. Third, among the forcibly displaced who return from abroad, a large proportion do not have formal refugee status. This, along with the large number of returned IDPs, means that eligibility for reintegration assistance cannot be governed on the basis of status alone.[112] In light of these factors, multiple respondents in Colombia noted that set models for voluntary repatriation and reintegration required substantial adaptation before they could be applied to the local context.[113]

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[109] Ibid.

[110] RoC respondents.

[111] UNHCR (2019) Guidance Note on International Protection Considerations for Venezuelans - Update 1. May 2019.

[112] Colombia respondents.

[113] Colombia respondents.

**FINDING 8. Despite the policy emphasis on voluntariness, meaningful measures to provide prospective returnees with options and agency remain infrequent. The extent to which their voice is reflected in aspects of the voluntary repatriation process is relatively limited.**

The emphasis on giving refugees a voice in the design and conduct of operations is highly visible in UNHCR policy, guidance and strategy. Notably, the Strategic Directions highlight the notion of 'putting people first' with, specifically, the foundational commitment that refugee "*rights, needs, dignity and perspectives will continue to define and shape our work*" and that "*[UNHCR] will strive to ensure that their voices, perspectives and priorities are heard and acted on – not just by us, but by all those whose decisions have an impact on their lives.*"[114] Articulating this aspiration at a more operational level is the 'Empower' section of the Directions, which focuses on the involvement and meaningful participation of PoCs in all aspects of refugee management.[115]

Contrasting with this aspirational goal was a perception among respondents that UNHCR repatriation practice was, in effect, geared more to making it accountable to participating governments than to prospective returnees. A prevalent view was that established practice was out of step with accountability to affected people (AAP) norms mainstreamed in recent years across the humanitarian sector and adopted by UNHCR.[116] In a related observation, there was overall agreement among respondents that the leverage given to refugees on the conditions of their own return was generally limited and did not meet the standards set under the 'Empower' heading of the Strategic Directions.

In a survey of UNHCR staff conducted for this evaluation (see Annex 8), a majority of respondents agreed that returns are voluntary, safe and dignified. Across these three dimensions, however, the proportion who believed that these conditions are not present remained sizeable, with about 30% holding the view that refugee returns in their respective contexts were not voluntary.

A critical issue raised by respondents was how much agency refugees actually enjoy in deciding on their return, and whether the notion of voluntariness, as articulated in UNHCR policy and legal doctrine, entails a binary choice or a scale of options.[117] The principle of voluntariness is strongly implied in non-refoulement as a cornerstone of refugee protection. The 1996 voluntary repatriation handbook defines it as "implying an absence of any physical, psychological, or material pressure".[118]

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[114] UNHCR (2017) Strategic Directions 2017–2021.

[115] Ibid.

[116] Accountability to affected people (AAP): https://emergency.unhcr.org/entry/42554/accountability-to-affected-populations-aap The evaluation notes that UNHCR's 2017 updated draft Handbook on returns offers a much more nuanced reflection on the subject. However, this guidance has still not been formally released, and was referenced by a relatively limited number of UNHCR respondents in this evaluation.

[117] Multiple global, regional and country-level UNHCR and external respondents.

[118] UNHCR (1996) Handbook Voluntary Repatriation: International Protection.

The case studies presented below, however, show that refugees simply do not live in an absence of physical, psychological or material pressure in their countries of asylum. Rather, their intention on whether or not to return is a fragile and constantly oscillating balance of complex considerations which, in operational and protection terms, translate into a range of opposing push and pull factors. The evaluation found that, in any given context, these factors are generally not well known or understood by UNHCR and other humanitarian actors.

In reality, refugees' decisions on return often come down to a constrained choice between bad options. While the evidence from the case studies in this evaluation suggests that a yearning to go home often weighs on these decisions, there is also strong evidence to show that adverse conditions in countries of asylum weigh just as heavily. In many cases these conditions will deteriorate over time, often as a result of curtailed aid, to the point where they become as bad as – or worse than – in countries of origin. Where that tipping point is reached, returns will often take place that are deemed voluntary. For example, while Iran has been extremely generous in enabling refugees access to services such education and health, opportunities for citizenship are almost non-existent.[119] While refugees can apply for work permits, options for long-term employment or self-employment remain limited. They often confine refugees to the higher-risk segments of the local job market, with no social safety nets and low or irregular pay. These circumstances have prompted some refugees to return at a time when Afghanistan seemed to present more attractive avenues. Likewise, in RoC, adverse conditions compounded by dwindling aid flows have prompted some refugees to voluntarily return to their countries of origin.

In other contexts, the notion of voluntariness is even more strained. In RoC, chronic insecurity has compelled some CAR refugees to return to their country. In Tanzania the government has been actively promoting repatriation, holding sensitisation meetings in refugee camps that have been termed "threatening" by some respondents in this evaluation.[120] The coercive actions of the government have been variously documented by Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, as have the human rights violations meted out on some returnees once they are back in Burundi.[121, 122] The Government of Tanzania has maintained that repatriation will remain "voluntary", but has taken actions that have been construed as an effort to create an inhospitable environment for Burundi refugees. These actions included closing markets where refugees trade, shutting down cafes and

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[119] A very recent development in Iran was a relaxation of the naturalisation laws, where children born to an Iranian mother and Afghan father are able to claim Iranian citizenship. However, citizenship remains impossible for most refugees.

[120] Male refugees, Nyarugusu Camp.

[121] Human Rights Watch (2019, December 12) 'Tanzania: Burundians pressured into leaving'.

[122] Amnesty International (2019, September 6) 'Tanzania: confidential document shows forced repatriation of Burundi refugees imminent'.

other social venues within refugee camps, forbidding refugees from keeping kitchen gardens or carrying out repairs on their houses, and ceasing all vocational skills training in the camps.[123]

Compounding the constrained environments in which refugees often make decisions on their return is a frequent lack of timely, relevant and up-to-date information on the conditions prevailing in countries of origin for both refugees themselves and for UNHCR and partner staff providing support to refugees. In some contexts, refugees obtain information through their own networks, but this is not consistent across contexts. For example, the lack of information was a concern among UNHCR respondents in Iran, who requested more detailed guidance on how to establish better systems for the ongoing collection and dissemination to refugees of up-to-date and location-specific updates on conditions in Afghanistan.

Other actors involved in the area of assisted returns, either directly or through research and analysis, and including the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and ReDSS, have attempted to move away from the narrow language of voluntariness and towards a more nuanced understanding of the need to optimise the agency of refugees within a set of typically constrained options.[124] There is, of course, an understanding among stakeholders that UNHCR has an obligation to uphold the established legal framework for refugees in a way that other actors are not formally bound to. Nonetheless, there was still a sense among respondents that UNHCR could do more to enable agency among refugees by promoting an understanding of voluntariness that goes beyond a binary choice on whether or not to go home. This entails closer engagement with refugee populations and the provision of full, up-to-date and localised information on conditions in areas of return, alongside equally substantive information on other options available to them

**Figure 7: UNHCR perceptions on voluntary, safe and dignified returns[125]**



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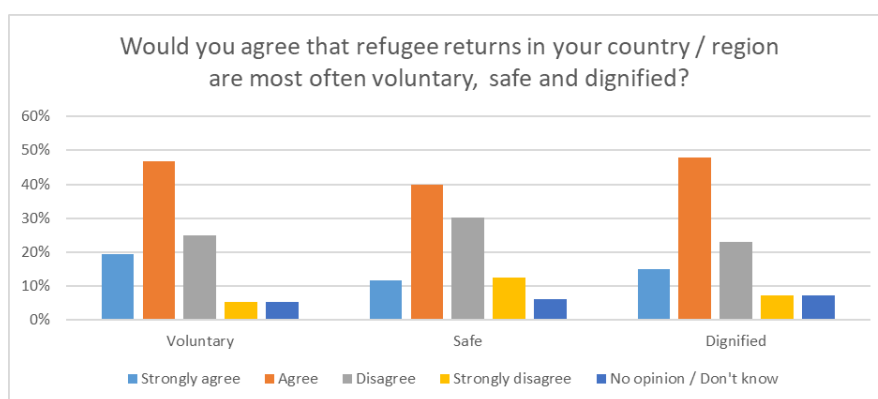
[123] Tanzania respondents.

[124] Other United Nations and NGO global key informants.

[125] Survey respondents.

## 4.3 EQ3: To what extent do UNHCR's different repatriation modalities effectively support repatriation and reintegration activities (effectiveness)?[126]

**Summary of findings**

Logistics and administrative tasks relating to facilitated returns are typically conducted in close adherence to established guidelines. These activities only target a relatively limited number of returnees, as they do not encompass refugees who return by their own means. Within their relatively narrow scope, these activities are generally viewed by stakeholders as efficiently carried out. The exception to this is information campaigns aimed at supporting refugee decisions, which would need to draw on more localised sources to be considered to be of real value.

In the area of reintegration, the effectiveness of UNHCR programming is constrained by a range of contextual factors, including shared accountabilities and a heavier reliance on long- term partnerships.

For the most part, facilitated returns occur in situations of low risk. There is some evidence that when facilitation is suspended or scaled down for security reasons, refugees opt for the more risky 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.

**FINDING 9. In facilitated returns, which are the repatriation modality most often supported by UNHCR, logistics and administrative tasks are typically well-honed and efficiently carried out. However, a lack of timely, localised information for prospective returnees was reported by respondents.**

Overall, the evaluation found that UNHCR was extremely effective in the conduct of output-level repatriation activities that draw on its programming know-how in protection. As noted in Finding 3, these activities tend to be staged primarily in countries of asylum. To a lesser extent, however, they also take place in transit, and shortly upon the arrival or returnees in their countries of origin.[127] The processes implied in these activities were well established and well administered, with tripartite

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[126] Sub-questions are: 3.1 How effectively has UNHCR support to self-organised voluntary return assisted refugees in returning and reintegrating across countries of origin and countries of asylum? How do activities lead to results across the Strategic Directions of protect, respond, empower and solve? What are the key constraining and enabling factors? 3.2 How effectively has UNHCR support to facilitated voluntary return assisted refugees in returning and reintegrating across countries of origin and countries of asylum? How do activities lead to results across the Strategic Directions of protect, respond, empower and solve? What are the key constraining and enabling factors? 3.3 How effectively has UNHCR support to promoted voluntary return assisted refugees in returning and reintegrating across countries of origin and countries of asylum? How do activities lead to results across the Strategic Directions of protect, respond, empower and solve? What are the key constraining and enabling factors? 3.4 How effectively do UNHCR repatriation and reintegration activities integrate Age, Gender and Diversity (AGD) considerations?

[127] See: https://www.unhcr.org/5894558d4.pdf

agreements and commissions (see next finding) used to help define roles and responsibilities and to help ensure that states recognise and actively support international protection principles.

As discussed in Finding 4, the 1996 handbook on repatriation is largely outdated, owing to gaps on core themes such as inclusion and accountability. Although the orientations which it sets out are incomplete, the handbook provides a critical source of guidance to COs, given the absence of alternative references. At output level, it also remains relevant to administrative tasks and processes at the core of UNHCR's protection role in repatriation. In CAR, this guidance has helped UNHCR assert its expertise in the legal and administrative aspects of its protection role in voluntary repatriation.[128] Interviewees generally agreed that the administrative and logistical processes involved in the facilitation of returns were well designed and effectively carried out. The same is true of assisted returns from Tanzania. Despite serious doubts raised about voluntariness of these returns, repatriation operations to Burundi were widely reported to be well organised from operational point of view. Likewise, in Iran, UNHCR support to the return process is generally viewed by respondents to be smoothly run, despite constraints imposed on the sequencing of activities involved.[129]

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**Box 3: Good practice on the administrative and operational processes involved in voluntary repatriation**

Within case study countries, the evaluation found some good examples of efficient administrative and operational processes involved in voluntary repatriation. Particularly, in CAR, as a country of origin, UNHCR's expertise in the legal and administrative aspects of voluntary repatriation is well recognised by all respondents to this evaluation. Facilitated returns have provided CAR refugees with a set of services that have enabled them to return home in a safe, dignified and voluntary way. Interviewees generally agreed that the processes involved in the facilitated return of refugees to CAR were well designed and effectively carried out. This related to the verification of the voluntary nature of returns, the identification of returnees by CAR authorities, the delivery of Voluntary Return Forms (VRF) and other documentation, and the planning and organisation of cross-border transportation, including security stopover and security arrangements. There was strong supporting evidence that facilitated refugee returns to CAR during the period under review were well executed from a logistical and organisational point of view.

There are also some practical examples of where AGD has been genuinely integrated specifically into voluntary repatriation processes in countries of asylum. For example, with returns to Burundi from Tanzania, logistically, the repatriation process is reported as being largely smooth with AGD being well mainstreamed. In Tanzania, shelters at the departure centres are disaggregated by gender, and there are also designated child-friendly spaces. With regard to PSNs, the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office of the UK recently (2021) supported the installation of wheelchair-friendly walk spaces at the departure centres, as well as of PSN-friendly WASH facilities that had been lacking for a long time. While challenges still exist, there are helpful lessons that can be reflected in other operations.

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[128] Multiple CAR respondents.

[129] In Iran, refugees who decide to return must first surrender their refugee status, before travelling to the border to receive counselling and complete the required administrative procedures. Exit counselling should, of course, be provided before refugees forego their status.

As part of its repatriation support, UNHCR routinely seeks to provide prospective returnees with information on living conditions in countries of origin. This activity relies heavily on good cross-border communication between COs in countries of asylum and countries of origin. In principle, it should also benefit from the process of decentralisation which, in January 2020, culminated in the delocalisation and full operationalisation of UNHCR's regional bureaux.[130] The bureaux assume responsibilities once performed by headquarters, spanning strategic direction, management guidance, technical support and key decision-making.[131] Among its key objectives, decentralisation aims to improve the support provided by the regional bureaux to country operations. Regarding information management functions relating to voluntary rerpatriation, however, decentralisation appears not to have as yet translated into clear performance gains at operational level. In countries of asylum, a recurrent observation among respondents was that information aimed at prospective returnees was typically not timely and detailed enough to be of use in supporting decisions on return. In Tanzania, for example, the evaluation found that there is a need to enhance internal UNHCR coordination in the area of cross-border information management. While respondents agreed that operational coordination surrounding repatriation operations was good, a challenge was identified in the collection and cross-border transfer of information relating to conditions for longer-term reintegration. UNHCR staff in Tanzania indicated that they do not receive sufficient information from their counterparts in Burundi to enable them to convey to refugees an accurate picture of the obstacles and opportunities implied in reintegration. The prevailing view was that there was a need for broader-based consultations between the two COs, going further than the logistics of short-term repatriation operations, and encompassing viable information management systems to better prepare prospective returnees to navigate the long-term challenges of returning home.[132]

The lack of up-to-date and localised information was also raised as a serious issue for refugees in other countries. In Iran, it was widely reported that refugees know very little about conditions in Afghanistan, particularly in the locations they intended to return to. The evaluation infers from this that the Support Platform for the Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees (SSAR), which was established in 2019, does not contribute significantly to the dissemination of information in support of refugee decisions on whether or not to return. UNHCR and other respondents stated that the lack of information on conditions in Afghanistan resulted in a large number of returnees deciding to travel back to Iran after a period of time. UNHCR and other respondents stated that this resulted in a large

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[130] Six of the bureaus are based in Addis Ababa, Amman, Bangkok, Dakar, Panama and Pretoria. The Europe Bureau continues to operate out UNHCR's Geneva Headquarters.
[131] Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme, *UNHCR's Transformation*, EC/72/SC/CRP.17, 18 June 2021.

[132] Multiple Tanzania respondents.

number of returnees travelling back to Iran after a period of time. Having surrendered their refugee status, they re-enter the country as asylum-seekers and face the risk of deportation.[133] Even with a very comprehensive quadripartite agreement in place, the effectiveness of voluntary repatriation was hampered by suboptimal coordination and information-sharing between Iran and Afghanistan COs:

> *"We had a quadripartite agreement between the Government of Iran, the Government of Afghanistan, IOM and UNHCR, but the missing link was we were asking the areas in which returnees could find a job and what training they could go through that was best; but, unfortunately, the Afghan side did not have capacity to provide us with the baseline information we needed to work on."[134]*

> *"For us in the field I was not aware of what was going on in Herat or Kandahar – I couldn't provide the information. There were some leaflets and flyers on the general health education situation but the data wasn't up to date."[135]*

In Colombia, the lack of cross-border coordination and information-sharing was reported as a significant impediment to successful repatriation. While there was ongoing dialogue, these interactions occur mostly on an ad hoc basis.[136] Respondents noted that there is a need to work more closely with countries of asylum on the provision to refugees of updated information on the security situation in Colombia. Conversely, there was also a need for the CO in Colombia to gain a better understanding of the number of Colombians considering return, to help in operational planning.

Regional bureaux have a key role to play in enabling voluntary repatriation and supporting reintegration. Specifically, they are potentially well placed to pool lessons learned in this area, and to support cross-border communication and coordination among COs within a region. As noted above, however, this is achieved with variable effectiveness. For example, as a result of the Africa bureau being decentralised into three units covering smaller zones, situations have emerged in which countries of asylum and their corresponding COs are now under separate bureaux, as is the case with CAR and RoC.[137] In general this challenge was viewed as relatively minor, and comes down to an added hurdle in the harmonisation of assistance packages. There was limited regional bureau evidence on support provided in information-sharing.[138] However, with the growing availability of data technology, the more systematic provision of timely and localised information to refugees is not

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[133] Iran UNHCR respondents.

[134] UNHCR Iran respondent.

[135] UNHCR Iran respondent.

[136] Multiple Colombia respondents.

[137] Regional respondents.

[138] Ibid.

beyond reach, and the prevailing view was that efforts to update UNHCR practice and capabilities in this area are necessary.

**FINDING 10. In both promoted and facilitated returns, achieving longer-term, sustainable outcomes in reintegration is highly challenging. The evidence is limited on impact-level results in reintegration and on the merit of related approaches and strategies.**

With regard to longer-term results, there was a lack of decisive evidence on the effectiveness of repatriation as a durable solution – that is, on repatriation opening the way to a safe and dignified life for former refugees, based on their reintegration into local communities where essential services and livelihoods opportunities are present. This relates to the 'Solve' pillar in UNHCR's Strategic Directions.[139] Alongside 'Empower', discussed in an earlier finding, the evaluation found that much remains to be done under this heading in the area of return and reintegration. Unlike 'Empower', however, the 'Solve' Direction cannot be pursued by UNHCR alone. As discussed previously, it hinges heavily on substantive cooperation among state, humanitarian and development actors. A significant constraining factor in measuring success here is a lack of clarity on attribution – in other words, on the share of impact-level results contributed by UNHCR and each other actor involved.

With regard to UNHCR-specific support following return, some gaps were noted. For example, the evaluation found that the voluntary repatriation package provided by UNHCR in Burundi was insufficient for reintegration. This package, including food, NFIs and cash ($150 per adult and $75 per child, designed to last three months) often lasted no longer than one month, and did not meet many of the returnees' needs. In an evaluation conducted by UNHCR in 2020, the cash support given per adult and child refugee returnee is deemed insufficient, given reintegration needs.[140] Due to a government-imposed cap, this amount is among the lowest in the world, even after its increase in 2020. Nonetheless, it allows some returnees to buy small parcels of land. Following the 2020 evaluation, UNHCR's joint planning efforts have increasingly emphasised the reintegration dimension of repatriation activities, to be conducted by UNDP and other development actors. However, critical funding gaps have hampered implementation. Many returnees still struggle to reintegrate their home communities, limiting their progress towards durable solutions. A significant proportion of them relocate to other areas, where their situation is not monitored.[141]

In CAR there is some evidence that facilitated returns give returnees better access to protection in the long term, including in the area of housing, land and property (HLP). In principle, the fact that

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[139] See: https://www.unhcr.org/5894558d4.pdf

[140] UNDP and UNHCR (2021) 'Burundi joint refugee return and reintegration plan, January - December 2021'.

[141] Multiple Burundi respondents.

these returnees have been registered pre-departure and are known to UNHCR allows them to be more consistently monitored for any protection risk once they have completed their return journey home, and to get advisory legal support on the recovery of their rights as CAR citizens.[142]

However, there is more limited evidence that UNHCR assistance to returnees in CAR offers advantages in terms of reintegration. Of necessity, lack of funding and adverse security conditions for reintegration support in areas of return have forced UNHCR and its implementing partners to confine their activities there mainly to protection monitoring and protection-centred humanitarian projects. What reintegration support is available is usually provided by other aid actors, through community-based programmes that do not differentiate between returned IDPs and refugees. Depending on locations, this assistance might include health, water and sanitation, education, food security and nutrition.

This assistance is dwarfed by the scale of needs, and the evidence of its impact on the reintegration prospects of returnees is limited. Respondents for this evaluation reported that a significant number of CAR returnees regularly travel back to RoC, their former country of asylum, to maintain their livelihoods. These "circular movements" are ways to maximise use of extended family connections, new and old trade routes, and/or availability of state and international assistance. In RoC, some refugees from DRC are also known to be moving back and forth between both countries in efforts to sustain their livelihoods. Respondents noted that these movements were normal, unstoppable and 'traditional' (i.e. 'pre-colonial'). In the remote forests of Likouala, in RoC, where traditional trade routes may be fewer, they also offered a development opportunity for the region. In 2020, livelihood support projects were initiated by UNHCR and its partners in Likouala – where 60% of adult refugees are without employment – to reduce dependency on assistance, strengthen dignity, and prepare refugees for voluntary return. These projects may have the unintended benefit of spurring economic growth in the region, past international borders.

In CAR, the WGDS has identified four so-called 'convergence zones', which it has sought to prioritise for reintegration support.[143] The convergence model has been applied in multiple forms in other contexts, notably Niger and Chad, where it has generally been viewed as positive in helping to achieve complementarity in coverage between humanitarian and development actors.[144] In the context of CAR, however, interviewees generally agreed that convergence zones have had no discernible effect

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[142] Multiple CAR respondents.

[143] Ibid. These zones were selected on the basis of six criteria designed to reflect their suitability for returns and reintegration, and for programmes in support of these processes.

[144] See, for example, Food Security Cluster (2018) 'Tchad: Zones de convergence humanitaire et développement en 2018'; UNCT Niger (2014, March) 'Programmer pour la resilience: "Les communes de convergence" de la théorie a la pratique'.

so far on the configuration of programme coverage on the ground. The intention had been to support and elicit refugee and IDP returns to these zones by achieving a level of local service provision that would incentivise them. Several interviewees noted that adverse security conditions and lack of funding did not allow state and aid actors to attain the needed level of service delivery in these zones, and had also inhibited the settlement of returnees there.

**FINDING 11. UNHCR invests much less in responding to self-organised returns than in supporting other types of return. Self-organised returns entail particular challenges, which make them difficult to respond to consistently. By definition, refugees opting for self-organised returns do not receive pre-departure assistance: there is evidence that they also receive significantly less reintegration support once they have completed their journey home. Given that self-organised returns are the most commonplace, these gaps, challenges and limitations affect the overall effectiveness of UNHCR support to returnees.**

As noted in Finding 2, the evaluation found that self-organised returns receive very uneven levels of support from UNHCR. Facilitated and promoted returns are generally characterised by more specific and better-established modalities of support.

From a practical standpoint, self-organised returns are the most difficult to respond to. Depending on modalities of support, there can be significant additional per capita costs to supporting self-organised returns, as compared to the facilitation of group returns.[145] Added to this are the additional staffing costs involved in locating and reaching out to individuals and households opting to return by their own means. Among the country case studies conducted for this evaluation, Burundi and CAR illustrate the significant challenges involved in supporting spontaneous returnees and the tendency on the part of UNHCR to prioritise facilitated group returns as a less challenging alternative.

In Burundi, in the context of returns starting in 2017, UNHCR provided little direct support to self-organised returns, focusing instead on assisting returnees through its facilitated repatriation operation. In 2020, UNHCR developed a framework of assistance to spontaneous returnees. However, respondents reported that many Burundians displaced in Tanzania who returned by their own means had likely remained 'invisible' to UNHCR, as they had not sought refugee status in Tanzania. They may therefore have returned without accessing dedicated assistance. UNHCR and government sources lacked data and analysis on this population.[146] Likewise, little information was available on the protection needs of refugees who had returned by their own means, or on their longer-term progress towards durable solutions. Border monitoring and various population verification exercises

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[145] UNHCR regional respondents.

[146] Multiple Burundi respondents.

in countries of asylum, as well as protection monitoring in Burundi, suggest that self-organised returns may have numbered in the tens of thousands.[147]

In the CAR context, the protection benefits of facilitated returns, as compared with self- organised returns, are clear. As noted above, facilitated returns in CAR provide a strong formal framework for the conduct of activities that give returnees an added measure of protection during and after their return. Tripartite agreements for these returns contain express provisions for the security of returnees and provide mechanisms to enhance their legal safety. Alongside these measures, facilitated returns enhance the safety of returnees by being accompanied by contextual analysis and ongoing assessments of security conditions.

However, there is evidence of a paradox whereby the better safety of facilitated returns is largely because they will only proceed if appropriate security conditions are present. Where this is not the case, the suspension of facilitated returns will cause refugees to opt for the riskier option of returning by their own means, with no facilitation and little or no protection or assistance from UNHCR. Thus, in the context of CAR – and possibly others – facilitated return as a modality of support only displaces the risk to returnees, but does not eliminate it. This points to the limitations of this modality and suggests a need to explore options for making self-organised returns safer and better supported, in line with the principles laid out in the GCR.[148]

Despite these challenges, there are clear examples of success in UNHCR's support of self-organised returns. In Colombia, as mentioned earlier, refugees are coming back to their areas of origin without UNHCR assistance, and only start receiving support after arrival back in Colombia.[149][150] Although some have access to cash grants,[151] most receive support through area-based interventions in the communities to which they have returned. This approach is generally viewed as working well.

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[147] UNHCR Regional Bureau for East and Horn of Africa, and the Great Lakes (2019), Background and Strategy Paper for the Tanzania–Burundi Tripartite Meeting, 27–28 Nov. (TWG) and 29 Nov. (TC)

[148] "It is […] recognised that there are situations where refugees voluntarily return outside the context of formal voluntary repatriation programmes, and that this requires support." Global Compact on Refugees, United Nations, New York, 2018.

[149] Male and female FGD participants.

[150] Not all refugees return to their areas of origin; and further, in the few cases where UNHCR does facilitate return, assistance is provided prior to return. UNHCR Colombia respondents.

[151] Through its standard operating procedure (SOP) on voluntary repatriation, the CO in Colombia formed an agreement with the operation in Venezuela to an exceptional procedure which allows the allocation of the 'Repatriation Grant Post facto' in prioritised specific cases for Colombians who have already returned to the country. In 2019, UNHCR Colombia therefore established a small budget for a limited number of post facto cash grants to assist self-organised returnees with the necessary documentation identified by field offices.

## 4.4 EQ4: To what extent is UNHCR able to leverage its lead role in the response to repatriation movements with relevant stakeholders to ensure reintegration activities as foreseen in GCR are put in place (Coordination)?[152]

**Summary of findings**

UNHCR leadership and operational coordination have been effective in terms of organising the practical aspects of returns, including pre-departure assistance and support on arrival. There are also some good examples of forward-leaning and proactive UNHCR leadership in the area of reintegration. These latter efforts have earned UNHCR some recognition, even if they are yet to culminate in conclusive results.

Regarding UNHCR efforts to engage development actors and catalyse their support for long- term reintegration, 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 the reticence of development donors.

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

**FINDING 12. UNHCR's leadership and operational coordination have been effective in terms of organising the practical aspects of returns, including pre-departure assistance and support on arrival. There are also some good examples of forward-leaning and proactive UNHCR leadership in the area of reintegration. These latter efforts have earned UNHCR some recognition, even if they are yet to culminate in conclusive results.**

At country level, the evaluation found that operational coordination is generally effective, due primarily to UNHCR's widely accepted leadership and comparative advantage in the area of repatriation operations. Downstream from repatriation activities, UNHCR has been seen to engage proactively with other aid actors on the ground, with a view to arriving at joint arrangements in support of reintegration. These efforts are well recognised in their respective contexts. They are generally geared to programme-level rather than strategic outcomes.

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[152] Sub-questions are: 4.1 How effectively does UNHCR ensure assistance activities related to repatriation and reintegration are coordinated across the broader landscape of partnerships with other actors? 4.2 How well has UNHCR provided leadership to other actors across the humanitarian–development–peace nexus to ensure repatriation, reintegration and rehabilitation are both sustainable and a shared responsibility across states and actors? 4.3 What are good examples of UNHCR's engagement in multilateral assistance programs for return operations? 4.4 To what extent are UNHCR national and regional operations able to project the repatriation needs to the level of global stakeholders? 4.5 How well has UNHCR projected refugee numbers and movements to provide leadership to planning and implementation activities for voluntary repatriation of refugees?

For example in Burundi and CAR, UNHCR was reported by respondents to be proficient in coordinating repatriation operations with the United Nations and implementing partners. While UNHCR focused on protection aspects, as well as on needs assessment, cash-based support and overall oversight, designated partners were entrusted with activities consistent with their respective areas of competence. For example, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) took charge of vaccinating children among the returnees, and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) registered women on arrival, to enable their gender-based monitoring as they travelled onward to their home communities. In general, partners reported working well together, with collective clarity of purpose towards objectives that were set clearly.[153]

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**Box 4: Good practice on UNHCR's coordination across the humanitarian–development nexus**

The evaluation identified good examples of UNCHR's coordination with actors across the humanitarian–development nexus in Burundi. From 2019 to 2021, UNHCR made noted efforts in that country to engage development actors through joint repatriation and reintegration plans, aligning these with national and international development frameworks. UNHCR brought together these actors in the JRRRP.[154] The JRRRP seeks to leverage existing systems – such as the cross-border referral mechanism operated by the Danish Refugee Council and funded by the European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (ECHO) – and ongoing UNHCR returnee protection monitoring to ensure an integrated and comprehensive reintegration response.[155]

Likewise, in Colombia, UNHCR has shown effective leadership in the coordination of activities with local actors, particularly through the Interagency Group on Migration Flows (GIFMM in its Spanish acronym) platform. Through its co-chairmanship of GIFMM, UNHCR coordinates the response to the needs of refugees, migrants, returnees and host populations, both at national level and through its local presence in 14 departments, in a manner that is complementary to the response of the Colombian Government.[156] UNHCR has been able to assert leadership effectively within GIFMM, liaising with different organisations on a daily basis to articulate the response to returnees and host communities in a mixed migration perspective.[157] Respondents commented that this platform has worked well, as UNHCR has not tried to impose a top-down approach but, rather, has created a common convening space where it and other actors can clarify their respective roles and achieve a more coordinated response. This approach to leadership through consultation, with a focus on solidarity and goal convergence, was well received by other participants.

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[153] Multiple Burundi respondents.

[154] The 2021 JRRRP brings together some 20 partners in Burundi and includes government ministries, UN agencies and NGOs, notably the Ministry of Interior, the Ministry of Human Rights, Social Affairs and Gender, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Youth, UNHCR, UNDP, UNICEF, UNFPA, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), UN Women, the World Food Programme (WFP), the World Health Organization (WHO), the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV and AIDS (UNAIDS), IOM, CARE, Danish Refugee Council, the International Rescue Committee (IRC), the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) and Welthunger Hilfe. The Director General for Repatriation, Reintegration and Reinstallation of the Ministry of Interior manages the coordination of refugee returns with the support of UNDP (as the lead for reintegration) and UNHCR (as the lead for repatriation) and the other JRRRP partners.

[155] Ibid.

[156] Regional Refugee and Migrant Response Plan (RMRP) for Refugees and Migrants from Venezuela.

[157] Multiple Colombia respondents.

In Iran, despite the extremely controlled context, UNHCR has demonstrated strong leadership in its support of the GCR's rollout. Despite these efforts, however, linkages across the humanitarian–development nexus remain weak. UNHCR works closely with the Bureau for Aliens and Foreign Immigrants' Affairs (BAFIA), which strongly coordinates refugee affairs. This working relationship is predicated on BAFIA's full authority over refugee operations in Iran, which provides a boundary for UNHCR's leverage and scope of action. In these constrained circumstances, UNHCR leads a protection working group through which support to refugees is managed and coordinated. UNHCR partners in Iran reported that while this group is useful as a venue for information-sharing, it is not strategic in nature.[158] Alongside it, broader-based coordination across agencies also takes place on advocacy and programming, for both registered and undocumented Afghans, through the Friends of Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees (SSAR) platform and the UNCT.

In RoC, the evaluation found that UNHCR performed strongly in its coordination of voluntary repatriation operations, working closely with the National Committee for Assistance to Refugees (CNAR in its French acronym) on legal and administrative matters, as well as with United Nations agencies – especially the World Food Programme (WFP) – and three implementing partners on operational implementation.[159, 160]

In terms of coordination through regional platforms, the evaluation found that UNHCR's three main support platforms – the SSAR, the Marco Integral Reginal par la Protección y Soluciones (MIRPS) and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) – have had variable success in terms of focusing efforts and mobilising resources and commitment.

The MIRPS Platform for Central America and Mexico is very comprehensive, with clear commitment from the countries involved. Latin America has a long history of solidarity and collaboration with regard to management of forced displacement, dating back to the 1928 Havana Convention. This has provided the foundation for the MIRPS Platform, which is based on international protection, shared responsibility for all vulnerable persons subject to forced displacement – refugees and migrants – and regional solidarity across countries. The language used in all MIRPS documentation is holistic and progressive, with equal reference to climate-induced and conflict-induced displacement, and with innovative objectives to seek comprehensive solutions for all persons.

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[158] Multiple Iran respondents.

[159] Terre sans Frontières, a Canadian NGO; African Initiatives for Relief and Development (AIRD), an African NGO based in Uganda; and the Agence d'Assistance aux Rapatriés et Réfugiés au Congo (AARREC), a national NGO. Partners agreed UNHCR's coordination was strong.

[160] Multiple RoC respondents.

In Africa, the IGAD Support Platform has the least evidence to show effectiveness. Much like Latin America, Africa has a long history of solidarity and collaboration, but without the degree of language and culture cohesion seen in Latin America. IGAD reports clearly highlight the challenges of migration – both forced and otherwise – but there is limited evidence of actual concrete improvements in repatriation and reintegration activities through the IGAD Support Platform. Respondents to this evaluation were somewhat sceptical of the impact of IGAD on the ground, specifically with regard to repatriation and reintegration.

> **Box 5: Good practice on UNHCR's engagement in multilateral assistance**
>
> Regionally, the evaluation found that UNHCR's engagement in multilateral assistance programs for return operations has been strong within Latin America. While its efforts build upon a long history of solidarity and collaboration within the region, the MIRPS Platform is seen as a holistic and progressive forum for shared responsibility for all vulnerable persons subject to forced displacement – refugees and migrants – and regional solidarity across countries (Belize, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico and Panama). The Platform is very comprehensive, with clear commitment from the countries to the objectives of the Support Platform. UNHCR's role to accompany the technical teams to identify local synergies between the national commitments of the MIRPS and the mechanisms of the United Nations System has worked well. Respondents noted that it has been a dynamic and collaborative process and there is strong ownership from UNHCR.
>
> Additionally, the Inter-Agency Coordination Platform for Refugees and Migrants from Venezuela (R4V), is crucial in ensuring oversight of the complex movements of people into and out of Venezuela. While a distinct platform from the MIRPS, R4V, which is co-led by IOM and UNHCR, again links refugees and migrants in a holistic regional approach. Respondents commented that the platform is creating space and looking for ways to use the expertise, focus and mandates of the different stakeholders in the most efficient and effective way. It is not a top-down approach but rather a harmonising approach and is seen as a key tool to assist with the Venezuela situation in Latin America.

The SSAR, launched in 2012 as a joint framework of UNHCR and the governments of Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran, is based on shared responsibilities and aims to ensure voluntary repatriation and reintegration of Afghan refugees in Pakistan and Iran and thereby also to prevent subsequent internal displacement of returnees. The SSAR provides a useful framing, but there are indications that it is not fully living up to its potential. While the regional approach remains the most attractive characteristic of the SSAR, and has certainly mobilised and focused attention in a coherent manner, criticisms have been made that as a quadripartite agreement it has not sufficiently engaged other necessary key actors, and this has compromised its effectiveness as an instrument for implementation. Perhaps more critically, progress on the first pillar – creating conditions in Afghanistan conducive to facilitating voluntary return – has never really materialised. This has been reflected by ever-diminishing numbers of return since the introduction of the SSAR in 2012. By default, this has resulted in a focus on the other two pillars of the SSAR, both of which are viewed by the Government of Iran as supportive of local integration. In 2021, BAFIA agreed to extend the SSAR by just one year rather than two years as requested, highlighting the Iranian government's decreasing confidence in the SSAR. In general,

there is a high degree of scepticism with regard to the SSAR from both UNHCR and external stakeholders.

Outside of the three official support platforms, there are other multilateral initiatives that provide some interesting and positive lessons. For instance, a good practice example is the R4V (See Box 4, above), which is seen as a key tool to assist with the Venezuela situation in Latin America. This is a distinct platform from the MIRPS but is crucial in ensuring oversight of the complex movements of people into and out of Venezuela. Again, this links refugees and migrants – and in fact is a platform co-led by IOM and UNHCR, following specific direction for joint leadership of the situation by the UNSG in 2018. Furthermore, for the Syria crisis, the Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan (3RP) was launched in 2014 and has gone from strength to strength, covering all aspects of the Syrian refugee response (and the communities hosting Syrian refugees) across Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey. The 3RP was developed as a "nationally-led, regionally coherent strategy", with joint overall support from UNHCR leading on the refugee piece and UNDP leading on the resilience piece, although with the protracted nature of the Syria crisis this does not fully meet the ongoing needs of hosting governments in the region.[161]

**FINDING 13. Regarding UNHCR efforts to engage development actors and catalyse their support for long-term reintegration, as envisioned by the GCR, results have been elusive. For the most part, the obstacles encountered by UNHCR in its pursuit of reintegration partnerships are inherent to the humanitarian–development nexus.[162] They are more pronounced in situations of mixed returns, and stem in part from competing leaderships on durable solutions. Partnerships in reintegration are also hampered by contextual factors, including moderate risk appetite on the part of development actors and their donors.**

Regarding more strategic-level partnerships geared to long-term reintegration support, stakeholders at all levels widely perceived continued challenges, relating mainly to the need to clarify terms for shared leadership and to achieve better progress in the convergence of policy, goals and programme processes across the humanitarian–development divide.

In line with the GCR, UNHCR aspires to playing a "*supportive and catalytic role*" in the development of partnerships for long-term refugee solutions.[163] In the survey conducted for this evaluation among

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[161] Global donor respondent.

[162] These obstacles relate to different programming cultures, practices and planning cycles among humanitarian and development actors as well as to the limited operational presence of the latter on the ground and the comparatively limited donor funding available for long-term reintegration support interventions. For a discussion of these obstacles, see for example Streets *et al.*, Evaluation of UNHCR's Engagement in Humanitarian-Development Cooperation, UNHCR, September 2021.

[163] United Nations (2018) Global Compact on Refugees.

UNHCR staff, 50% of respondents agreed that GCR objectives regarding burden-sharing are being realised, and over 50% agreed that UNHCR has played a catalytic role in enabling the sharing of responsibilities for refugees among a broader range of aid actors.

**Figure 8: UNHCR perceptions on GCR burden-sharing objectives being achieved and UNHCR's catalytic role**[164]
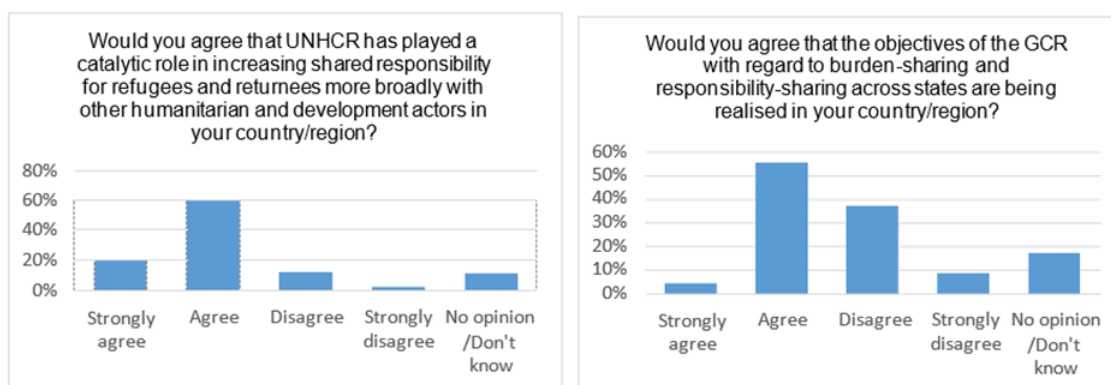


Despite these favourable perceptions, it remained unclear among many respondents what UNHCR's catalytic role actually entailed, and how much it has really contributed to the outcomes observed. Some donors questioned UNHCR's effectiveness as a catalyst,[165] while other respondents noted that the partnerships envisioned by the GCR had not materialised in their operating contexts:

> *"When the rubber hits the road, we are stuck on elementary stuff. If there was a framework for partnership, we could be more nuanced [in a shared understanding of respective roles and collective outcomes]."*[166]

> *"I think it is one of those areas where from policy perspective there is a long way to go, particularly where UNHCR coordinates with partners. Where I would start the conversation is around transparency – there continues to be a sense that UNHCR's policy position is not as transparent as humanitarian agencies would like it to be."*[167]

In the area of reintegration, these issues appeared to be exacerbated by a tension between UNHCR's desire to maintain leadership and the extent of its dependence on development partners to progress on reintegration goals. In contexts of mixed returns especially, multiple respondents questioned the soundness of UNHCR's prominent role in reintegration. In CAR they pointed out that refugees make up only a small fraction of the returnee caseload; even if they had been more numerous, UNHCR's limited expertise in reintegration would have warranted a more participatory approach at an earlier stage. Respondents noted that UNHCR had been slow to give UNDP an equal voice in the WGDS:

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[164] Survey respondents.

[165] Global donor respondents.

[166] Global respondent.

[167] Global respondent.

*"They [UNHCR] had such a different approach to addressing forced displacement for so many years - they did it all. You have this global [...] organisation, without a history of pulling others in and leveraging expertise [...] That hasn't been their way of working. There is an instinct for UNHCR to do all things refugee-related, rather than [knowing] when to hand over."[168]*

There was broad acknowledgement among respondents, however, that the responsibility to form partnerships was shared by all actors and that there was a need for all to assume collective ownership:

*"UNHCR throw the ball, [but there is] nobody there to catch it. The coach needs to come in – but who is that?"[169]*

As noted in an earlier finding, challenges in achieving partnerships in reintegration are also compounded by contextual factors. In CAR, multiple respondents noted that development actors have been reluctant to invest at scale in an operating environment that remains highly volatile, and where local government counterparts do not always provide a firm foundation upon which reintegration programmes can build. Sources for this evaluation expressed the view that there was room for UNHCR to be more proactive in its engagement with development donors, including at regional level.[170]

At field level, the scant presence of state actors in many areas of return is also a significant impediment to reintegration programming. In CAR, due to weak or absent state interface in many areas of return, some reintegration programmes have adopted community-based approaches to fostering reintegration. However, while communities provide real potential for a range of reintegration activities, notably in protection and gender mainstreaming, they are no substitute to state structures in critical areas such as security, the rule of law, legal safety and the delivery of civil documentation.[171]

In Colombia there has been some good progress in reintegration, although more could be done to strengthen relationships with state and development actors. UNHCR has made good headway in positioning durable solutions more centrally in the UNCT.[172] This was done by establishing a subgroup on durable solutions, co-led with UNDP.[173] More recently, UNHCR has been working with the International Labour Organization (ILO) to support the development of information material on access to employment as well as on hiring Venezuelan and Colombian returnees and combating xenophobia

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[168] Global respondent.

[169] Global donor respondent.

[170] UNHCR CAR respondents.

[171] Multiple CAR respondents.

[172] UNCT in Colombia is more focused on IDPs and on durable solutions for IDPs.

[173] Operations Plan Colombia 2018.

and discrimination in the workplace.[174] Respondents believe that interventions with UNDP and ILO have worked well, especially with ILO, where certain systems set up across United Nations agencies help to facilitate collaboration.[175]

With international financial institutions (IFIs) such as the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB), there have been progress in dialogue and joint activities – such as joint missions, joint analytical work, collaboration on the IDA 18 and 19 sub-window,[176] and the Joint Data Center with the World Bank – across the time frame of this evaluation. However, it is perceived that UNHCR is still in the process of defining the terms and framework of its engagement with IFIs, with some progress still required before clarity is achieved in this area.[177] The same perception was reported by respondents in CAR with regard to discussions held between UNHCR and the World Bank.

**FINDING 14. Challenges remain with the consistent and systematic collection and use of operations-level data on repatriation and reintegration activities. This impedes institutional lesson-learning and is an obstacle to UNHCR's global leadership and pursuit of GCR objectives.**

Multiple donors for this evaluation mentioned a perceived opaqueness in UNHCR data.[178, 179] These are not new critiques; in fact, UNHCR has committed to improvements in this area. In 2019 it commissioned an evaluation of data use and information management approaches,[180] which concluded that:

> *"UNHCR urgently wants, and needs, better quality and more coherent data and analysis to make better strategic decisions, operational decisions, and show its results and performance to stakeholders [and that] UNHCR is currently missing opportunities to use data and analysis in advocacy with states, especially when forced displacement discourses are politicized."[181]*

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[174] This issue also affects Colombian returnees who are considered PoCs to UNHCR, as many are culturally Venezuelan, given that they have lived in the country most of their lives and so experience similar levels of discrimination as Venezuelan refugees.

[175] UNHCR Colombia respondents.

[176] See: https://ida.worldbank.org/en/replenishments/ida18-replenishment/ida18-regional-sub-window-for-refugees-host-communities

[177] Multiple Colombia respondents.

[178] Global donor respondents.

[179] UNHCR is aware of this challenge and has a Data Transformation Strategy (2020-2025) which is part of ongoing efforts by UNHCR to address this issue.

[180] UNHCR (2019) Evaluation of UNHCR's data use and information management approaches.

[181] Ibid.

Multiple global-level respondents noted that when UNHCR does provide data in the context of repatriation and reintegration, the data sets involved are very comprehensive. However, rather than occurring at the planning stage or on a preliminary basis, data transfers often take place on a 'need to know' basis, and are generally motivated by the urgency of enabling joint responses to urgent situations. While there was broad support and understanding of the need to ensure the rigorous safeguard of sensitive protection data, multiple respondents observed that UNHCR's capacity in data-gathering constitutes one of its strengths, and it could add measurable value in the context of partnerships in reintegration if it resolved to share data more proactively.[182]

In Burundi, UNHCR collected useful returnee data and provided its partners with analysis to support repatriation and reintegration plans; nonetheless, the information conveyed remained scant in key areas. While UNHCR provided vital data and analytical inputs into JRRRP planning, gaps remained on the resilience strategies adopted by returnees. The data made available provided much detail on returnees assisted by UNHCR, but was more limited regarding spontaneous and projected returns. Analysis covered immediate humanitarian needs and protection issues, but was less complete on long-term outcomes and the progress made by returnees in reintegration.[183]

In Colombia, the lack of government data on returns has hampered UNHCR's ability to project refugee numbers and trends for planning purposes and to advocate for returnee needs at global level. At country programme level, UNHCR conducts border monitoring, and the resulting information is shared with COs in countries of asylum. However, UNHCR and other respondents stated that systems to monitor returnees past their border crossing back into Colombia are weak. As a result, UNHCR has difficulties in reaching out to these PoCs *ex post*, to assess their progress in reintegration and to provide support where possible.

## 4.5 EQ5: To what extent has UNHCR adapted repatriation and reintegration activities to become more sustainable (sustainability)?[184]

**Summary of findings**

The extent to which UNHCR has adapted repatriation and reintegration activities to become more sustainable is variable across countries of asylum and countries of origin. The financial, operational and policy burden of supporting the sustainability of returns falls more heavily on reintegration programming

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[182] Ibid.

[183] Ibid.

[184] Sub-questions are: 5.1 How well has UNHCR reallocated resources to ensure repatriation and subsequent reintegration of refugees is sustainable as highlighted in the GCR objectives? 5.2 How well has UNHCR advocated to states for reallocation of resources to ensure repatriation and reintegration for refugees is sustainable as highlighted in the GCR objectives?
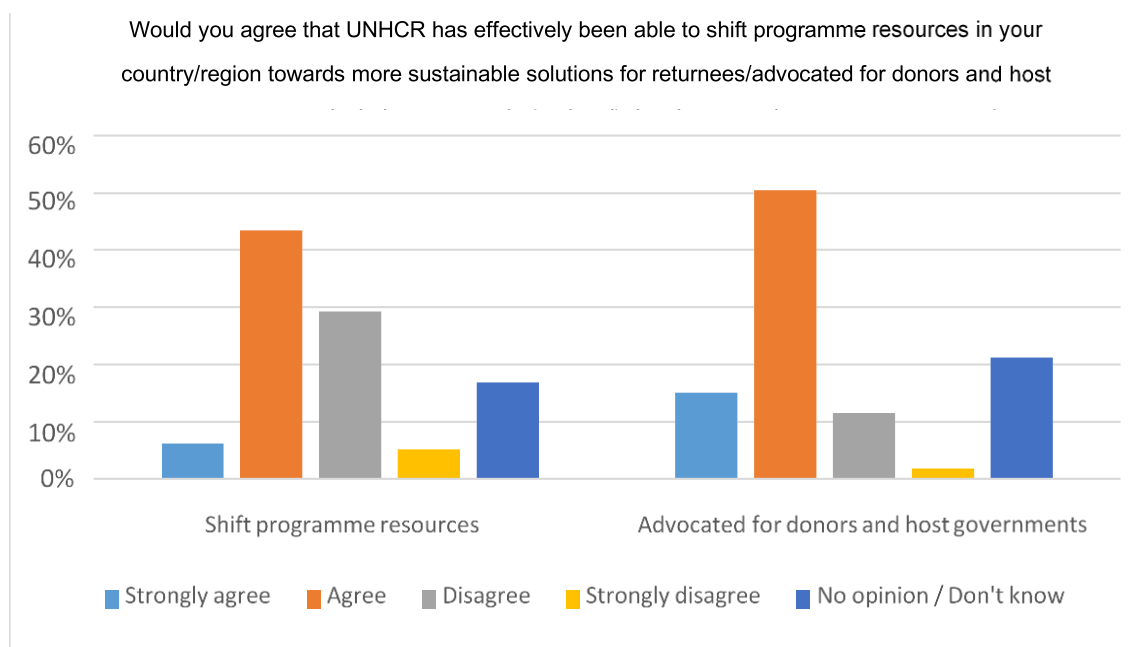
than on short-term assistance provided for repatriation. This is not reflected in UNHCR budget allocations, which continue to be higher for assisted returns than for reintegration support.

In countries of origin there is some evidence to suggest that sustainability in returns can be improved through a broad-based approach to reintegration support, encompassing returned refugees alongside other affected groups. As well as being easier to fund, this broader approach is likely to provide better opportunities for efficiencies and economies of scale in programme delivery.

**FINDING 15. The financial, operational and policy burden of supporting the sustainability of returns falls much 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.**

In the survey conducted for this evaluation, a majority of UNHCR respondents (see Figure 9 below) agreed that UNHCR has effectively shifted programme resources towards more sustainable solutions for refugees. Likewise, a majority agree that UNHCR has effectively advocated for donors and host governments to include returnees in their development plans. It is notable, however, that UNHCR financial data does not clearly reflect these trends (see Figure 10 below).

**Figure 9: UNHCR perceptions of its effectiveness regarding shifting resources and advocating to donors and host governments**[185]



Would you agree that UNHCR has effectively been able to shift programme resources in your country/region towards more sustainable solutions for returnees/advocated for donors and host

Legend: Strongly agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly disagree | No opinion / Don't know

Categories: Shift programme resources | Advocated for donors and host governments

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[185] Survey respondents.

Figure 10: Return and reintegration budget data 2010–2021[186]
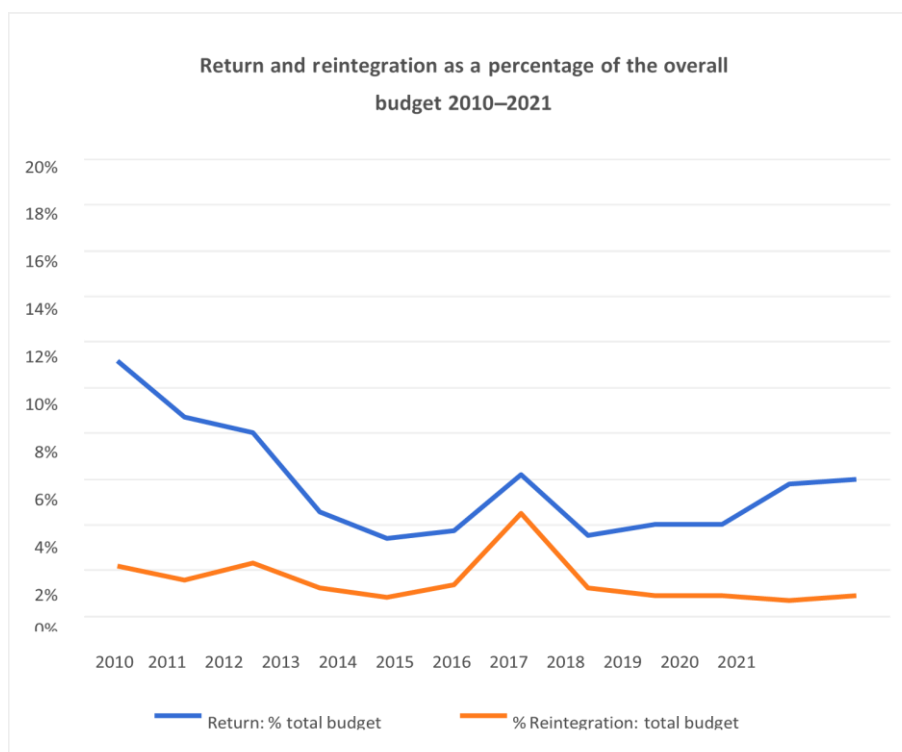
Between 2010 and 2014, the budget allocated to voluntary return activities dropped from a high of 11% of UNHCR's total budget to a low of 3%. It then rose again in 2015 and hovered thereafter between 4% and 6%. For reintegration activities, other than a spike in 2016 to 4% of the total budget,[187] allocations have remained broadly constant at 1%–2%.

While further evidence and analysis would be required to draw definitive conclusions from this data, it does not in itself provide evidence that resource allocation to voluntary repatriation and reintegration has shifted substantively to more comprehensive solutions, as envisioned by the GCR. Rather, it suggests that UNHCR has continued to prioritise cross- border repatriation activities over long-term reintegration support, presumably because these activities are closer to its protection mandate and traditional area of competence. The trend could also be indicative of the fact that reintegration programming relies more heavily on partners and, therefore, makes less demands on UNHCR's own resources. Here too, however, data from the survey and desk review is too limited to enable definitive conclusions. Donors interviewed for this evaluation did highlight a perceived shift in UNHCR's positioning, geared to engaging states more on reintegration support.[188] In general, however,

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[186] The data in this graph is compiled from overall budget data provided by UNHCR Evaluation Service to the Evaluation Team: return-related data includes all budget lines pertaining to returnee activities; reintegration data has been extracted across the 'durable solutions' rights groups.

[187] Note that the overall budget has steadily increased year on year from 2010 to 2021, without any discrepancy in 2016.

[188] Global donor respondents.

respondents reported low overall levels of programming activity in areas relating specifically to the reintegration of former refugees/returnees.[189] Regarding reintegration as part of a broader recovery and reconstruction agenda, respondents noted in the context of CAR that donors had little appetite to fund long-term reintegration support in environments that seemed not to be conducive to meaningful results in this area.

The same donor sentiment was observed in the case of returns to Burundi, where the evaluation found evidence that resources have not shifted to reintegration in a way that is commensurate with the ambition of the GCR's objectives. The sustainability potential of repatriation back from Tanzania to Burundi remains weak, owing largely to an imbalance in support between repatriation and reintegration. This is due primarily to a lack of funding in the latter area. In terms of achieving sustainability, the funding of reintegration activities was recognised by many respondents to be the more critical – as well as the more resource-intensive. Inclusion in national programmes and national development activities is key to ensuring sustainability of return. Yet it was found in Burundi that UNHCR invested relatively significant resources on voluntary repatriation and comparatively little on reintegration. During 2015–2020 it spent $28 million, or 20% of its total country spending, on voluntary returns, and only $2.2 million, or less than 2% of country spending, on reintegration.[190]

The Burundi refugee response is the most underfunded in the world.[191] UNHCR considers insufficient donor support for the JRRRP to be a key barrier to repatriation and reintegration in Burundi. It has made considerable efforts to mobilise resources for the voluntary repatriation programme there, spending almost $500,000 in donor relations on donor engagement for its operations there in 2020. Currently it is engaging with 20 donors to fund different aspects of the programme. The largest share of the funding sought is for voluntary repatriation activities, with reintegration support amounting to significantly less.

In spite of these efforts, it was commonly acknowledged by respondents in both Tanzania and Burundi that sustainability in returns has not been attained, due at least in part to a funding shortfall. Whether larger investments would have produced better outcomes remains open to question, however, given the precarious security and economic conditions that continue to prevail in the country.

**FINDING 16. There is some evidence to suggest that sustainability in returns can be improved through a broad-based approach to reintegration support, encompassing returned refugees alongside other affected groups. As well as being easier to fund, this broader-based approach is likely to provide better opportunities for efficiencies and economies of scale in programme**

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[189] Multiple global respondents.

[190] UNHCR Global Focus: https://reporting.unhcr.org/ [accessed 2 December 2021].

[191] UNHCR (2021, September 30) Operational Data Portal. Tanzania.

**delivery. Other avenues to secure the better sustainability or returns are worth exploring, but are less promising.**

According to the 2021 GCR Indicator Report, cited earlier, countries of origin have received proportionately more development assistance than countries of asylum. This would suggest favourable conditions for Objective 4 of the GCR, which relates to addressing root causes and enabling conditions conducive to return. Notably, however, the number of donors supporting countries of origin is lower than that for countries of asylum, which suggests that more can still be done to advocate for broader donor engagement in contexts at which reintegration efforts are directed.[192]

In discussions with respondents on the financial sustainability of reintegration programming, four key aspects of the challenges involved became apparent. First, in terms of financing modalities, it was observed that in comparison with budgets generally available for recovery and development, funding streams used or available for the specific purpose of supporting the reintegration of former refugees were comparatively very limited. The funding modalities that once accompanied promoted return operations, such as those involving Priority Areas of Return and Reintegration (PARRs) in Afghanistan in the past decade, appeared less likely across all country case studies included in this evaluation today.[193] A notable feature of these operations is that they came complete with dedicated funding at scale for the reintegration of returned refugees. As noted in an earlier finding, however, large-scale promoted returns have become infrequent, and the funding streams that accompanied them have likewise become harder to secure.

Conversely, multiple respondents observed that in contexts in which returns take place today, returning refugees did benefit measurably from reintegration effects produced by programmes not intended for them only. Funding for these programmes appeared easier to secure than more narrowly earmarked contributions. In Colombia, for example, many returned refugees have benefited from resources meant primarily for the reintegration of returned IDPs. Similarly, a UNICEF water and sanitation programme in a semi-urban area of Burundi might benefit refugees who have returned there, alongside other members of the broader community. In these circumstances, seeking to obtain funding for a broader and more diverse beneficiary population was likely to yield significantly better results than an approach targeted exclusively at returned refugees. By the same token, advocacy efforts aimed at resource mobilisation were likely to have better success if they related to large and diverse population segments, rather than returned refugees alone. This integrated approach is consistent with United Nations Sustainable Development Group (UNSDG) decision 2011/20 and with

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[192] UNHCR Global Focus: https://reporting.unhcr.org/ [accessed 2 December 2021].

[193] This evaluation notes that outside of the case studies included in this evaluation, in Afghanistan PARRs remain an area of funding focus; and in South Sudan similar 'Pockets of Hope' are being established – information provided by UNHCR global respondents.

UNHCR's own guidance.[194] Given that returned refugees make up a population that is comparatively much smaller globally than returned IDPs, they are set to benefit proportionately more from an integrated approach enabling resources to be mobilised on a larger scale. In 2020 the former group consisted of 251,000 people, compared with global population of returned refugees of 3.2 million.[195]

Secondly, respondents in multiple contexts observed that a broader-based approach, as well as being easier to fund and to advocate for, may also enable greater efficiencies in programme delivery. Although dedicated research would be needed to corroborate this, there are indications that sustainability gains in returns and reintegration have been achieved, in some contexts, by integrated programming and area-based approaches: that is, bringing refugee and IDP returnee caseloads under the same programming and coordination arrangements. In CAR, for example, the WGDS approaches refugee and IDP returns in a holistic manner. This is likely to have enabled economies of scale through integrated coordination and programme arrangements spanning both groups. The same effects have been reported in Colombia, where area-based programmes cover both returned IDPs and refugees as well as host communities. In this latter case, a comparatively very limited number of refugees can access programme support delivered through programme infrastructures rolled out primarily for the two other groups.

> **Box 6: Good practice on sustainability in returns**
>
> UNHCR's approach of viewing reintegration in the specific perspective of returns has occasionally been conducive to a silo-like outlook, which has constrained opportunities for much-needed system-wide cooperation. Nonetheless, this evaluation found some indications that sustainability gains in returns and reintegration have been achieved, in some contexts, by integrating programming and area-based approaches. For instance, in Colombia and CAR, UNHCR has aimed to enhance the sustainability of returns by approaching refugee and IDP returns in a holistic manner, and achieving economies of scale through programmes that benefit both groups. In the CAR context, the most notable way in which sustainability gains have been achieved in voluntary returns and reintegration has been to bring refugee and IDP returnee caseloads under the same Solutions programming and coordination arrangements. CAR's WGDS spans both these groups, as do most of the programmes aimed at their reintegration in areas of return.

Thirdly, another, less successful, avenue pursued by COs has been to increase the sustainability of returns through localisation and capacity-building aimed at local counterparts. In CAR, for example, UNHCR has engaged in this by building the capacity of both government partners, such as CNAR, and a range of non-governmental partners. Despite the capacities gained, however, local partners remain heavily dependent on external funding.

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[194] Among the multiple references to an integrated approach to reintegration in UNHCR policy documentation, see for example UNHCR Note on the Mandate of the High Commissioner for Refugees and His Office, DIP, October 2013, p. 8.

[195] UNHCR (2021) Global Trends 2020.

Lastly, another way in which the sustainability of returns might potentially be increased is by tapping into existing funding streams for activities that support reintegration, through partnerships with development actors that can contribute their own resources to this objective. For example, to complement its working relationship with UNDP in CAR, UNHCR has engaged in consultations with the World Bank to explore prospects for a cooperation framework. These talks are ongoing.[196]

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[196] Multiple CAR respondents.

# 5. Conclusions

This section presents five broad conclusions that draw from our findings across the five EQs, combining both a strategic and operational reflection on UNHCR's voluntary repatriation and reintegration support, and feeding into a set of targeted recommendations.

## CONCLUSION 1: RELEVANCE

In a more complex and more diverse global environment, the operating models used by UNHCR for its voluntary repatriation and reintegration operations lack adaptiveness to specific contexts. The operational guidance available for reintegration support is limited.

*(Links to findings 1 to 6)*

As reflected by the downward trend in the number of refugees returning to their countries of origin, the global environment in recent years has become less conducive to voluntary repatriation. The increased protractedness of crises has made it more difficult for many refugees to envision return as a feasible or desirable option. Alongside these developments, rapidly increasing migratory flows in the latter half of the previous decade have strained the capacity of host countries globally, and often resulted in growing pressure for refugees to go home.

In these conditions, ensuring that refugees can return safely, voluntarily and in dignity has become more difficult. Some of the core assumptions that underpin UNHCR's approach to repatriation support have also been severely tested. Chief among these is the notion that repatriation can be organised as part of a wider process of orderly transition from conflict to peace and recovery. The paradigm used to conceptualise UNHCR repatriation and reintegration support – the 4Rs Framework – assumes that transition is linear and broadly predictable. This assumption was dominant at the time when the 4Rs Framework was developed, in the first half of the previous decade; however, it has now been widely disproved. According to the understanding that now prevails, progress towards peace and normalisation rarely takes place in a linear continuum; rather, it involves an iterative, inherently haphazard, and often highly uncertain process. This new understanding is illustrated by recent or ongoing emergencies, such as those in Afghanistan and Iraq or, less visibly, in Burundi or CAR.

In this more complex and diverse environment, voluntary repatriation and reintegration support require a level of adaptiveness to context which UNHCR's set models and approaches do not readily provide. Reflecting this, one of these models – promoted returns – is now rarely used. The other – facilitated returns – has become the default model for UNHCR's repatriation operations.

Promoted and facilitated returns are essentially scenario-based. Problematically, these models presume transition-type scenarios that are rarely the most prevalent in situations of return. The most

frequent scenario – that in which refugees return spontaneously, outside of any formal peace process or repatriation framework – elicits comparatively limited responses on the part of UNHCR. Although it is the most widely used model, facilitation is resource- intensive and lacks flexibility. It does not adequately address the needs of many refugees who, as a result, often decide to return by their own means, with limited UNHCR assistance.

The evaluation found that in contrast with repatriation operations, for which well-established – if imperfect – models exist, UNHCR reintegration support does not draw on set operating models, and is the subject of relatively limited guidelines or directions. Reintegration programming is at the outer periphery of UNHCR's traditional area of competence. In this area, UNHCR cannot as easily draw on its mandate to assert its leadership and authority. Its comparative advantage is more difficult to assert. Its dependence on partnerships with development actors is also more pronounced, with significant challenges posed by shared accountabilities for collective outcomes. While these challenges are touched on in UNHCR policy, they are the subject of relatively little programme-level guidance to date.

# CONCLUSON 2: COHERENCE

There is an inherent tension between UNHCR's role in repatriation as part of a political process of transition and its protection objective of ensuring that refugee returns are voluntary, safe and dignified. This tension hampers an operational understanding of voluntariness that fully captures the complexity of choices made by returnees and the constraints that come to bear on these decisions.

*(Links to findings 7 and 8)*

As a core premise that underpins UNHCR's conception of return, the assumption that voluntary repatriation is the most preferable of the three durable solutions was viewed with reservation by a significant number of respondents. This assumption situates repatriation as part of a desirable process of political transition and normalisation, which UNHCR is implicitly committed to supporting. More problematically, it presumes that the best interests of refugees are aligned with this process and can safely be subsumed in it. The evaluation found that, on the contrary, refugees often have an understanding of their own best interest that is at distinct variance with the trajectory and outcome of transition processes, and in which the prospect of their return does not feature prominently. In these circumstances, UNHCR often struggles to balance its commitment to the transition process with its obligation to refugees. The tensions between these two imperatives can sometimes be significant, yet little guidance exists on how to reconcile it.

In particular, the evaluation found that in the adverse circumstances in which returns usually take place, the principle of voluntariness is significantly more difficult to operationalise than is reflected in UNHCR guidance. Voluntariness is typically viewed in terms of a binary choice for refugees on whether or not to return. Belying the apparent simplicity of this choice is a range of complex factors

and considerations, and elaborate strategies are often deployed by returnees to spread the risks of return over time.

At their core, the challenges involved in these dynamics often relate to adverse conditions in countries of asylum, where, short of refoulement, obstacles to local integration can nonetheless be significant or overwhelming. In these conditions, a refugee's decision to return to his or her country of origin, where conditions are often also unfavourable, may well be voluntary. Nonetheless, in this rather commonplace scenario, the choice to go home will be constrained in ways that are yet to be fully reflected in UNHCR policy and practice.

In light of these considerations, the binary view of voluntariness that is generally conveyed in UNHCR policy and guidance is problematic. In fact, voluntariness from a refugee perspective is more about a scale of imperfect options in an environment of constrained choice. For UNHCR, possible programme responses to this reality may lie in the areas of context analysis and information management, pre-departure counselling and efforts to broaden the range of options available to refugees, notably by helping to remove some of the pressures that might compel them to return home prematurely.

## CONCLUSION 3: EFFECTIVENESS

As promoted returns are no longer widely practised, facilitation has become the model most often deployed in repatriation operations. In most cases examined, this model is proficiently implemented, yet it is limited in its design and does not address the needs of the majority of returnees. In the area of reintegration, results have been constrained by highly adverse contextual factors and a lack of up-to-date guidance.

*(Links to findings 9 to 11)*

The evaluation found that promoted returns have declined sharply in the past two decades. This model of assisted voluntary return involves large-scale repatriation operations. It relies heavily on negotiated peace processes and strong political impetus for transition, backed by the international community. These conditions are now rare. There is also good evidence that in the context of promoted returns, a recurrent challenge for UNHCR has been to withstand political pressure to support repatriation when conditions on the ground do not allow for good protection outcomes or present viable pathways to solutions. For these reasons, promoted returns were often viewed by respondents in the evaluation as having limited effectiveness in terms of protection outcomes.

By default, facilitation has become the operating model most widely used for assisted returns. However, this model does not capture the needs of refugees who choose to return independently or outside of formal repatriation operations. There is strong evidence that this group makes up the largest proportion of returnees globally.

The processes involved in facilitation are well defined. Their focus is primarily on repatriation support per se; that is, they consist of activities carried out mainly before and during return, and shortly after arrival. The success of facilitation hinges heavily on activities conducted in countries of asylum, where the legal basis for UNHCR operations is strong and its unique comparative advantage over other aid actors is well recognised. These activities are geared mainly to protection. They include information campaigns aimed at prospective returnees, as well as intention surveys and pre-departure counselling and registration.

With the exception of information campaigns, which would need to capture more localised content to add measurable value, facilitation as practised by UNHCR was widely viewed by stakeholders to be well executed. This effectiveness benefits from the fact that the activities involved are typically geared to practical and time-bound operational results. In this respect, they contrast sharply with reintegration support activities in countries of origin, which often entail more distant objectives set in the long term and more complex coordination arrangements spanning diverse stakeholders.

The evaluation found that the available guidance on the facilitation of returns is closely adhered to by UNHCR staff at country level. Problematically, however, this guidance contains important gaps. For example, it does not reference the Strategic Directions or place high emphasis on the importance of inclusion and empowerment in the design and conduct of repatriation operations. Nor does the guidance provide detailed direction on the conduct of outreach activities or on the use of up-to-date tools and technologies, including digital platforms and social media. Given that outcomes in assisted returns depend heavily on outreach, the use of modern capabilities in this area would be particularly likely to yield high dividends.

In the area of reintegration, impact-level results have been elusive, due in part to the broad timespan needed for these results to materialise. As noted earlier, reintegration support is a particularly challenging area of activity for UNHCR. The guidance contained in the 1996 Repatriation Handbook and 2004 Handbook on Repatriation and Reintegration is relatively scant on the subject of reintegration. For obvious reasons, it does not incorporate policy orientations derived from the 2018 GCR or developments that have occurred in the past decade in the area of partnerships. The guidance predates UNSG Decision No. 2011/20,[197] and therefore offers no direction on how to harmonise UNHCR's protection-based conception of Durable Solutions with the more development-oriented notion of the term advanced by UNDP, as called for by this Decision.

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[197] Effective implementation of the UNSG's Decision No. 2011/20 was intended to be based on context and on the operational capacities of the two agencies, UNHCR and UNDP, to assume their respective responsibilities. The decision was not explicit on this but each country operation has the responsibility to articulate the implementation according to its realities, the commitment of the country government and the associated stakeholders.

Another notable gap in the 1996 and 2004 handbooks is their lack of guidance on UNHCR's role as catalyst, and what this means in practice.[198] Finally, the guidance has yet to incorporate the significant know-how acquired by UNHCR in the past decade in area-based approaches and in their application to mixed caseloads composed of both returned refugees and IDPs. In an area where good outcomes are generally scarce, there is broad consensus that area-based programming has yielded positive results in reintegration, and provides promising avenues for reintegration programming. Despite its clear advantages and benefits, good practice that has emerged around this approach in the past 15 years has not yet been captured and crystallised.

## CONCLUSION 4: COORDINATION

The effectiveness of UNHCR in the coordination of repatriation operations is widely recognised. Long-term reintegration support presents more significant challenges, which UNHCR has been slow to address.

*(Links to findings 12 to 14)*

UNHCR-led coordination is widely viewed as effective in the context of repatriation operations, which typically involve time-bound tasks, clear divisions of labour and well-defined objectives. In this context government, United Nations and implementing partners were near-unanimous in stating that UNHCR exercises strong and effective leadership. As a result, activities conducted before, during and shortly after assisted returns generally tap into a broad and diverse range of areas of competence, including health, gender, food security, and assistance to persons with special needs. The evaluation noted that UNHCR is particularly proficient in its coordination of activities provided for in tripartite agreements. For example, processes relating to civil documentation and the verification of identities generally rely on a fluent interface with the relevant authorities, including for capacity-building where required.

In the programmatically more complex area of reintegration support, it was less immediately clear whether UNHCR coordination has consistently yielded the desired results. In terms of stakeholder engagement and its role as catalyst, UNHCR's work typically takes place in difficult conditions. In addition to a less well-established comparative advantage and a greater dependence on partners, as noted above, it must also reckon with competing claims for sector leadership, divergent conceptions of the task at hand, and limited donor appetite for long-term programmes in areas of return, which are often volatile and poorly endowed in state capacity for governance and service provision.

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[198] For a more in-depth discussion on this subject, see UNHCR's Leadership and Coordination Role in Refugee Response Settings, Desk Review, UNHCR, December 2019.

As illustrated in two of the three countries of origin case studies conducted for this evaluation, the local need for reintegration support to returnees is often greater in scale for ex-IDPs than for ex-refugees. By its nature, reintegration programming is often indistinguishable from broader development support – except for its protection dimension, over which UNHCR enjoys unchallenged leadership. Outside of this competency niche, UNHCR has had to proactively engage with broader United Nations and other development actors to identify attainable collective outcomes in reintegration. This process has been arduous, and the foundations on which it rests remain fragile.

In this respect, an opportunity may have been missed with UNSG Decision No. 2011/20 on Durable Solutions, which might have spurred broader UN-wide consultations on Durable Solutions and their implication for mixed caseloads of returnees. Some 10 years after the Decision was issued, limited progress has been made at global level in harmonising the distinct conceptions of Durable Solutions held respectively by UNHCR and development actors. Likewise, much remains to be done to translate these conceptions into joint operational modalities for reintegration support. Where some success was observed, it has tended to be in the context of COs, and as a result of a pragmatic outlook that drew less on formal mandates and statutory roles than on an ad hoc recognition among all actors of their actual strengths and comparative advantages. On the whole, however, instances in which this complementarity has been achieved remain rare, for reasons that are highly context-specific and cannot easily be generalised.

Despite this overall limited success, there is evidence that system-wide cooperation in reintegration programming produces better results when based on mixed approaches that encompass both returned refugees and IDPs, as well as host communities. Conversely, a more narrow status-based approach to reintegration may hamper broad-based cooperation and constrain the value added to joint interventions by each participant. This should be borne in mind in the context of area-based programming, which can either be carried out in a siloed manner or serve as a platform for multi-stakeholder interventions.

## CONCLUSION 5: SUSTAINABILITY

Opportunities to improve the sustainability of returns lie primarily in better and more broad- based partnerships and coordination, across mixed caseloads of returnees.

*(Links to findings 16 and 17)*

Although success in reintegration is widely understood to be at the core of voluntary returns as a durable solution, UNHCR programme practice and resource allocation continue to favour repatriation support over reintegration programming. At least in part, this bias speaks to UNHCR's protection mandate and to the fact that reintegration is at the periphery of its traditional area of competence. While the onus for reintegration outcomes lies with development actors, there is room for UNHCR to

use its resources and convening power to greater effect – by dedicating more resources to research, by sharing programme data more openly and proactively, and by repackaging reintegration programming so that the efficiencies gained might make it more attractive to donors.

The challenges which UNHCR faces in supporting reintegration do not owe solely to the fact that this area lies at the periphery of its traditional areas of competence. By nature, the environments in which reintegration support typically takes place are also, objectively, more adverse than those in countries of asylum. These are often countries in the grips of protracted emergencies or in the early stages of recovery, with tenuous foundations for reintegration programming in the long term. The considerable uncertainty over programme outcomes in these settings often makes it difficult to secure donor support for interventions beyond emergency humanitarian assistance.

The reintegration budgets that were once available as part of promoted returns are now unlikely, given that a 'full-package' approach to repatriation funding is no longer widely practised by donors. In response to this, an avenue worth exploring is that provided by mixed coverage reintegration support, encompassing not only returned refugees but also returned IDPs and host communities. This approach is already well on its way to being mainstreamed by COs in countries of origin, yet is supported by limited formal guidance or championing. Although further research would be required to verify this, it is likely that this broader-based approach can raise the appeal of reintegration programming to donors, as it enables efficiency gains and economies of scale in outcomes achieved. This broader approach would also open prospects for cooperation with a wider and more diverse range of development actors.

Although reintegration support is outside of UNHCR's core area of competence, multiple respondents in the evaluation noted that among its key assets in catalysing stakeholder support in this sector are its capacity for data collection and its strong operational presence on the ground. UNHCR can support multi-partner interventions in this area by sharing programme data more proactively and by designing modalities for joint programme delivery that can draw on its strong operational footprint.

# 6. Recommendations

The recommendations below follow from the conclusions. They are grouped into five broad thematic areas: (i) normative framework, policy and guidelines; (ii) operationalisation and programming; (iii) information management; (iv) coordination and partnerships; (v) external relations, resource mobilisation, and budgeting. Each overarching recommendation is pitched at the level of the relevant entity/stakeholder within UNHCR and is accompanied by suggested actions in support of the recommendation.

## Normative framework, policy and guidelines

The voluntariness of returns is often constrained by adverse conditions and a lack of options in countries of asylum. These conditions can weigh measurably on the decision of refugees to go home, even as conditions there are also unfavourable.

The policy statement that voluntary returns are the most preferable of the three durable solutions is potentially problematic, given the constrained and suboptimal circumstances in which many assisted returns take place.

Adverse circumstances in countries of asylum often fall short of constituting refoulement, and can coexist alongside policies on the part of host governments that purport to be supportive of refugees. Nonetheless, they should be acknowledged and factored into normative guidance and programme-level responses by UNHCR.

> **Recommendation 1**: Attenuate the operational bias placed on return and reintegration by the formal statement, conveyed in UNHCR policy,[199] that this solution is the most preferable for refugees, and place greater emphasis on contextual realities, returnee needs and the principles of voluntariness, safety, and dignity in assisted returns.
>
> **Overall responsibility:** Senior Executive Team in collaboration with DIP, DRS and DSPR.
>
> **Suggested actions:**
>
> 1.1. Update the Policy Framework and Implementation Strategy on UNHCR's Role in Support of the Return and Reintegration of Displaced Populations (August 2008) to acknowledge the complexity of return and reintegration in different contexts, further clarifying UNHCR's role in supporting different modalities of return, including self- organised returns.

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[199] Reference is made here to the Policy Framework and Implementation Strategy paper on UNHCR's role in support of the return and reintegration of displaced populations (August 2008) as well as numerous Standing Committee updates on voluntary repatriation to UNHCR's Executive Committee (EC/66/SC/CRP.15, EC/67/SC/CRP.13, EC/71/SC/CRP.11).

1.2. Noting the necessity for collective action across multiple actors, enhance conditions for voluntariness in returns by giving refugees more latitude in their use of UNHCR support, and more flexibility in the way they stage their return. In consultation with states and in the respect of their sovereignty, explore possible modalities of support enabling temporary returns and 'circular' movements between countries of asylum and countries of origin to allow refugees to better secure their livelihoods in their countries of origin and to rely on phased return strategies to mitigate risk to themselves and their households.

1.3. In addition to reporting on numerical targets for the number of voluntary returns through UNHCR's global results framework, consider establishing clearer standards, supported by indicators where possible, for the operationalisation of the principles of voluntariness, safety and dignity in assisted returns, so that these can guide multi-year strategies at regional and operational levels.

The two handbooks which COs rely on for the conduct of return and reintegration support were drafted in 1996 and 2004 respectively, and are outdated. The evaluation acknowledges that plans are underway to update these handbooks. It welcomes these measures and considers them to be a matter of urgency. Indeed, the current guidance perpetuates practices that are no longer consistent with contemporary norms, assumptions and best practice. It does not incorporate key elements of the 2018 GCR or the Strategic Directions in either their 2017–2021 or 2022–2026 version.[200] Further, it is critical that UNHCR policies are clear on the UNHCR role to support the leadership, ownership and accountability of government, which is key to achieving durable solutions.

**Recommendation 2**: Update the 1996 Handbook on Voluntary Repatriation: International Protection and the 2004 Handbook for Repatriation and Reintegration Activities – to reflect contemporary norms and policy orientations conveyed in the GCR and Strategic Directions, and to provide guidance on new approaches and tools.

**Overall responsibility:** Assistant High Commissioner for Protection in collaboration with DIP and DRS.

**Suggested actions:**

2.1. In the new guidance, reflect the recommendations in this report, and address gaps on the following issues:

   a. reframe voluntary repatriation assistance through the lens of the five core Strategic Directions, and address particular gaps related to inclusion, empowerment, and solutions (solve);

   b. place renewed emphasis on mixed situations and comprehensive solutions, integrated programming, and harmonised/area-based approaches to achieving sustainable reintegration for returnees;

   c. address the criticality of supporting refugees who return independently, outside of formal repatriation operations;

   d. reconcile notions of durable solutions and cooperation with development and peace actors, and place greater emphasis on UNHCR's ambition to proactively contribute to finding solutions to root causes, as articulated within the Strategic Direction of 'Solve';

   e. update the tools for outreach and information management in support of prospective returnees.

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[200] Referenced in the report as *the Strategic Directions.*

2.2. Revise the models used to conceptualise reintegration, bearing in mind that the linear conception of transition conveyed by the 4Rs Framework is no longer widely held and that advances in area-based programming warrant the updating of best practice in this area.

# Operationalisation and programming

The two main models traditionally used for UNHCR repatriation operations – promoted and facilitated returns – do not have the operational agility and adaptiveness needed to deliver appropriate support to most returnees in a given context. As a result, many refugees opt to return outside of formal repatriation operations, and have limited access to UNHCR assistance. The evaluation found that spontaneous returns often take place in adverse conditions, which can make it particularly difficult for UNHCR to locate returnees and to provide them with appropriate assistance.

As noted in the conclusions above, the return and reintegration of refugees typically takes place in conditions that are much more fluid and unpredictable than generally assumed in UNHCR guidance. The continuum proposed in the 4Rs Framework does not accurately capture contextual realities, nor provides a viable basis for the design and planning of repatriation and reintegration support activities. UNHCR's approach to supporting voluntary repatriation should be informed less by 'off-the-shelf' models derived from the 4Rs Framework, such as promotion and facilitation, and more by a pragmatic assessment of the needs and vulnerabilities of all prospective returnees and local communities in any given context, ensuring that good practice in area-based approaches is maximised and expanded.

**Recommendation 3**: In the design of return and reintegration support interventions, place heavier emphasis on needs assessment and analysis. In particular, ensure that the needs and vulnerabilities of refugees who return independently, outside of formal repatriation operations, are accurately captured and reflected in assessments and programme design.

**Overall responsibility:** Assistant High Commissioner for Operations in collaboration with DIP and DRS.

**Suggested actions:**

3.1. Adopt a more evidence-based approach that captures and addresses key elements of the operating context, including self-organised returns. Develop internal communication material (aligned to the five core Strategic Directions) to support this vision and reference the GCR's mention of the need to support refugees who return independently, outside of formal repatriation support operations.

3.2. In countries of asylum, dedicate resources and devise modalities for better outreach and engagement activities aimed at refugees who are considering return, including those planning to return by their own means, in view of assessing their needs and circumstances more accurately.

3.3. In countries of origin, scale up protection monitoring in border areas and known areas of return. Establish support hubs which returnees, including those who have returned by their own means, can approach for advice and legal and non-legal assistance. Use these hubs to collect first-hand evidence from returnees on the circumstances of their return.

3.4. At HQ and Regional Bureau level, establish repositories of knowledge and best practice on returns and reintegration, to be fed into by COs involved in assisted returns.

3.5. Increase inclusion of refugee-led organisations within the discussion.

In the area of repatriation, the congruence of support interventions with the actual needs and circumstances of returnees is further constrained by the fact that returnees – including women – have little direct input into the design of these interventions. They should have more say over the circumstances of their assisted returns.

**Recommendation 4**: Structurally enhance the participation of prospective returnees in decisions relating to their return.

**Overall responsibility:** DIP in close collaboration with the Protection Pillar at regional bureau level.

**Suggested actions:**

4.1. In countries of asylum, encourage UNHCR staff to adhere more consistently to existing UNHCR guidance on the participation of refugees – including women – in consultations surrounding the modalities for their return (1996 Handbook on Voluntary Repatriation, pp. 14, 16, 19, 30).

4.2. To support and complement outreach activities aimed at refugees who are considering return, design templates for accountability mechanisms that span both prospective and actual returnees and give them a voice in the design and conduct of repatriation support interventions.

In the area of reintegration, returnees also have a limited say in the design of programmes meant to assist them. Notably, most reintegration support is geographically confined. Little is known about the socioeconomic trajectory and coping strategies of refugees who return to locations outside of known or dedicated areas of return. These make up a large proportion of returnees globally.

**Recommendation 5**: Based on a more systematic assessment of contexts of return, including linking more information from refugees in countries of asylum (such as intention surveys) with monitoring activities in countries of origin, explore modalities for reintegration support that better accommodate the need of many returnees to retain some mobility post-return.

**Overall responsibility:** DRS in collaboration with Strategic Planning Pillar/Programmes/Operational Coordination at regional bureau level.

**Suggested actions:**

5.1. In countries of asylum, engage with a selected number of prospective returnees who are willing to maintain contact post-return. Rely on these individuals as a sample group that can be approached for evidence and insights on obstacles and opportunities in reintegration.

5.2. Explore the possibility of mainstreaming modalities of reintegration support that are not geographically confined, such as mobile cash and online vocational training.

5.3. In designing needs- and context-appropriate interventions – which will also inform local development priorities – draw on repositories of knowledge held by local actors. Ideally, a repository of localised knowledge should be recorded and maintained at the level of the operation and regional bureaux.

# Information management

The information supplied by UNHCR to prospective returnees, in view of supporting their decisions on return, does not add substantively to information which refugees can obtain through their own networks. In order to be of real benefit, information conveyed by UNHCR should be collected on an ongoing basis, and rely on systems that enable UNHCR to collect first-hand information from a broad network of sources at the sub-national level. This information should be accompanied by regularly updated advisories on practical aspects of return and reintegration, covering such core themes as security risk, local job markets, civil documentation requirements for returning refugees, and how to secure dedicated reintegration support.

**Recommendation 6**: Ensure that the information supplied by UNHCR to prospective returnees, in view of supporting their decisions on return, is more timely and more localised.

**Overall responsibility:** DIP and DRS in collaboration with the Senior Executive Team (SET) at regional bureau level.

**Suggested actions:**

1.1. In countries of origin, develop dedicated capacity for the ongoing collection of information on conditions at sub-national level in areas of return, and develop a strategy for systematic documentation of localised knowledge and evidence in support of sustainable reintegration. This information should encompass conditions for access to public services in countries of origin and the inclusion of returnees in national systems.

1.2. Provide guidance to COs in countries of origin and countries of asylum on information-sharing and how to harmonise their information management activities.

Currently, the management of information intended for returning refugees, as well as certain other core activities in repatriation and reintegration, does not make use of up-to-date tools and technology. This makes it significantly more difficult for COs to perform these activities at scale.

**Recommendation 7**: 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.

**Overall responsibility:** DIP, Division of External Relations (DER) and DRS in collaboration with SET at regional bureau level.

**Suggested actions:**

7.1. Review existing digital platforms and create templates for platforms that can be established at regional level and accessed by refugees and local organisations on an ongoing basis. Ensure that these platforms are designed to enable refugee/returnee inputs and information-sharing.

7.2. Dedicate resources and create capabilities for the management of these platforms by regional bureaux.

## Coordination and partnerships

As noted earlier, repatriation operations per se are generally efficiently coordinated by UNHCR. This is largely due to the fact that these operations are model-based; that is, they involve pre-identified tasks that are familiar to UNHCR and usually entail clear divisions of labour with its partners.

The main challenge with regard to coordination lies in the area of long-term reintegration support. Despite UNHCR's efforts to incorporate a development dimension in its operations, for example by deploying Durable Solutions Officers to support its country programmes, the evaluation found few measurable signs of progress towards a whole-of-society approach, involving the mobilisation of a broad range of stakeholders over shared reintegration objectives. In this regard, it is important to note that the constraints and obstacles involved are not specific to reintegration; rather, they are also present in efforts to support local integration in countries of asylum. These constraints relate both to systemic impediments to better cooperation with development or government actors, and the continued necessity of UNHCR support to foster government leadership, ownership and accountability, in order to achieve sustainability in reintegration efforts. In many operating environments, the clearest manifestation of limited progress in this area is the protracted nature of UNHCR's reintegration assistance, with continued challenges in both time-based and criteria-based approaches to the handover of this assistance to government and development partners.

The evaluation notes that UNHCR provided significant and substantive input into the 2017 Durable Solutions Handbook published by UNDP. Nonetheless, it found that UNHCR and its development counterparts have a limited shared understanding of what Durable Solutions entail in operational terms. Guidance on how to capture and reflect this shared understanding at programme level should be provided in the next iteration of the Voluntary Repatriation and Reintegration handbooks.

**Recommendation 8**: Drawing on the framework set by UNSG Decision 2011/20, achieve better clarity on how the two distinct conceptions of Durable Solutions held by UNHCR and its development partners should be integrated at operational level, notably as regards shared leadership and the joint coordination of relevant programmes.[201]

**Overall responsibility:** DRS in collaboration with the SET at regional bureau level.

**Suggested actions:**

8.1. In guidance on repatriation and reintegration, make reference to UNSG Decision No. 2011/20 on Durable Solutions, as well as the 2017 Durable Solutions Handbook published by UNDP on behalf of the Global Cluster for Early Recovery and the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Framework on

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[201] See Finding 3, which references the fact that the "separate bodies of guidance on durable solutions issued at global level by UNHCR and UNDP cover markedly different areas and do not reference each other".

Durable Solutions.[202] Provide more detailed guidance on how to harmonise the programme design and implementation work of both agencies, and on what modalities should be deployed for programme-level cooperation between UNHCR and development actors more generally, in mixed situations involving both refugees and IDPs.

8.2. Building on experience gained in UNHCR's advocacy to support the inclusion of refugees in national development plans, develop advocacy strategies to secure the earlier engagement and greater participation of both governments and development actors in reintegration efforts.

8.3. Building on the framework for durable solutions (2003): develop clearer standards, supported by indicators where possible, for UNHCR's catalytic role as envisioned in the GCR, and support operations in their effort to proactively engage with development and political actors, support peacebuilding initiatives, and leverage opportunities for reintegration.

In the area of reintegration, better and broader-based coordination is the single factor most likely to yield efficiency gains and to result in broader-based partnerships and donor support. In pursuing this objective, an important asset is UNHCR's capacity to generate programme data that can be used to support reintegration programming by partners.

**Recommendation 9:** At country and regional levels, support the development of broader and better integrated multi-partner platforms.

**Overall responsibility:** DRS and DIP in collaboration with SET at regional bureau level.

**Suggested actions:**

9.1. Develop regional frameworks for return and reintegration that further operationalise the principles of voluntariness, safety and dignity, with a strong focus on strengthening national and local capacity.

9.2. Develop an engagement strategy for international, national, and local actors in supporting reintegration by proactively sharing programme data and supporting the design of modalities for joint interventions that leverage UNHCR's strong operational presence.

9.3. Promote and mainstream coordination architectures that can achieve efficiencies and economies of scale by spanning mixed caseloads, as well as by pooling programme information and enabling joint approaches.

9.4. Build on existing good practice platforms such as SSAR and MIRPS, and reinforce UNHCR's support to governments in facilitating tripartite agreements to ensure coherent work across a broader range of partners, particularly in the area of sustainable reintegration and durable solutions for returnees. Ensure that there is common understanding and consensus among partners regarding definitions, frameworks, roles and responsibilities regarding durable solutions and reintegration.

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[202] https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/system/files/2021-03/IASC%20Framework%20on%20Durable%20Solutions%20for%20Internally%20Displaced%20Persons%2C%20April%202010.pdf

# External relations, resource mobilisation, and budgeting

The evaluation acknowledges UNHCR's systematic efforts to advocate for system-wide cooperation in the area of reintegration, in keeping with its GCR mandate to act as catalyst in this area. It is important to be note, however, that an approach to advocacy and resource mobilisation that focuses solely on returned refugees is inherently challenging, given the comparatively small numbers involved. An integrated approach that incorporates returned refugees in reintegration programmes also intended for IDPs is likely to secure better donor support. This integrated approach is consistent with UNSDG decision 2011/20 and with UNHCR's own guidance, and would encourage scalability by fundraising for broader-based approaches to reintegration involving multiple partners and mixed caseloads of returnees.

**Recommendation 10**: Structure budgets and design funding instruments that support reintegration intervention spanning mixed caseloads of returned refugees, returned IDPs and local communities.

**Overall Responsibility:** DER and DSPR in collaboration with the SET at regional bureau level, and the Division of Financial and Administrative Management (DFAM).

**Suggested actions:**

10.1 In donor-facing narratives, present reintegration as a needs-based rather than status-based area of intervention. In donor reporting on return and reintegration, minimise the use of status-specific indicators and prefer needs-based indicators where possible.

10.2. Where appropriate, explore opportunities to establish country-based funding instruments, such as multi-donor trust funds, that can cover mixed reintegration caseloads and are accessible by multiple partners, and are therefore supportive of a multi-stakeholder approach to reintegration.

10.3. Explore the feasibility of achieving better funding convergence across UNHCR's Pillar 3 (Reintegration programme) and Pillar 4 (IDP programme), including connecting to debates on innovative financing for IDP solutions.

10.4 Increase the pool of resources available for programming for reintegration – by proactively sharing programme data and by supporting the design of modalities for joint interventions that leverage UNHCR's strong operational presence.