



# COVID-19 Evaluative Evidence Brief #1

## Evaluation Service October 2021

### Introduction

To support organizational learning, UNHCR's Evaluation Service (E.S.) has commissioned an Evaluative Synthesis of UNHCR's adaptation and response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The purpose of the synthesis is to provide robust and timely evidence to UNHCR on how effectively the organisation has adapted to COVID-19, and to highlight areas of strength as well as the challenges emerging from across our evaluations. Six evaluations have been analysed to date.

The series will culminate in a Synthesis Report in April 2022, which will capture the achievements made and lessons generated. More information on the methodology for this brief can be found at the end of the document.

### 1. What are the effects of the pandemic on Persons of Concern (PoC)?

**Socioeconomic Effects:** Amongst a range of effects resulting from or exacerbated by COVID-19, evaluations identify increased economic hardships for PoC, as livelihood opportunities are constrained and poverty rates increase<sup>1</sup>. Evaluations also note increased reports of SGBV<sup>2</sup> and delayed access to services; increased evictions<sup>3</sup>; and increased xenophobia and discrimination<sup>4</sup> experienced by PoC. Evaluations also signal reduced access to basic services.<sup>5</sup>

**Access to Territory:** The pandemic has affected PoC movements. The evaluation of the Venezuela response found decreased regular movements of Venezuelans through formal border points, and increased irregular

entries through informal crossings, including increased trafficking across borders.<sup>6</sup>

**Documentation:** Four evaluations record suspension of Refugees Status Determination<sup>7</sup>, issuance of birth certificates and other key documentation<sup>8</sup> required for entitlement to basic services. PoC also experienced increased arrests due to expired documentation.<sup>9</sup>

### 2. What adaptations did UNHCR make to respond to COVID-19?

**Management/response structures:** The L2 emergency declaration for COVID-19 in 2020 enabled the Venezuela response to adapt through providing more staff and funds, facilitating organisational speed, increasing the visibility of the crisis, and allowing staff to better articulate and advocate the needs of UNHCR with different stakeholders.<sup>10</sup>

**Country Office adaptation:** Five evaluations found reduced face-to-face responsiveness and contact with field operations. But all five equally found efforts by UNHCR to maintain contact with PoC through remote methods such as telephone helplines, partners and community contacts.<sup>11</sup> This was not straightforward however, with challenges including a lack of connectivity/phones for PoC<sup>12</sup> and personal interaction compromised for delicate or sensitive issues e.g. trauma, mental health issues and SGBV.

**Fundraising:** Evaluations report that COVID-19 has opened up the funding landscape with increased investment from development

actors such as Multilateral Development Banks (MDBs) in humanitarian activity.<sup>13</sup> Even where funding availability increased under COVID-19, as for Venezuela response, resources were not always adequate overall to meet needs.<sup>14</sup> Collective approaches such as a joint UN appeal for COVID-19 related funding in Zambia,<sup>15</sup> were not always successful, with donors preferring to work bilaterally.

**Reallocating budgets:** The evaluation of UNHCR's Engagement with Humanitarian-Development Cooperation found that UNHCR reprioritized its budgets in many contexts to respond to COVID-19, often deprioritizing core funded programmes such as those for vocational training and the environment (for example in Niger and Bangladesh).<sup>16</sup> Earmarking protected some types of activities, but also reduced UNHCR flexibility to react to COVID-19 immediate needs.

### 3. How relevant and effective has UNHCR's response been so far?

**Relevance:** Evaluations analysed so far found UNHCR's response to be relevant overall<sup>17</sup>, with some challenges. Actions which helped ensure relevance included:

- **Utilising existing humanitarian-development cooperation** to support the pandemic response. For instance, in Niger, UNHCR successfully advocated for the COVID-19 response plan to cover nationals and refugees alike; in Jordan similar criteria and modalities were used for the cash facility and the national social protection scheme/job protections also applied to refugees; and in Bangladesh, UNHCR engagement in public health infrastructure benefitted both host communities and refugees.<sup>18</sup>
- **Providing flexible financing** through the Innovation Fund, which supported

adaptation to meet COVID-19 related needs within operations.<sup>19</sup>

- **Expanding vulnerability criteria** in the Venezuela response, which enabled UNHCR to better address the needs of PoC.<sup>20</sup>
- **Using cash-based initiatives** in many countries, which enabled PoC to meet their immediate needs.<sup>21</sup>

Challenges included:

- **Difficulties in directly accessing PoC** made assessments harder to complete for the Venezuela response, creating gaps in UNHCR's knowledge of the population.<sup>22</sup>
- **Reprioritising humanitarian aspects of the response** reduced attention to issues such as statelessness.<sup>23</sup>
- **The switch to emergency mode**, as in Zambia and the Venezuela response, restricted some capacity development and livelihoods approaches which are essential for tackling the socioeconomic effects of the crisis.<sup>24</sup>

**Effectiveness:** The five evaluations which addressed effectiveness found UNHCR's interventions to be effective so far, but with room to improve. Achievements included:

- **Continuing to advocate for protection** during COVID-19 such as for the inclusion of PoC in national COVID-19 response plans, as well as into national social protection systems and development plans.<sup>25</sup> Evaluations also found UNHCR advocacy on access to territories, regularization and documentation e.g. through supporting online registration for asylum systems.<sup>26</sup>
- **Supporting national health** responses by providing equipment, refugee housing units<sup>27</sup> etc. and conducting hygiene campaigns.<sup>28</sup>



- **Providing lifesaving support** through cash-based responses.<sup>29</sup>
- **Continuing status determination and resettlement** through a shift to remote methods.<sup>30</sup>

Areas where more progress could have been made were:

- **Advocacy on socioeconomic inclusion** in the Venezuela response.<sup>31</sup>
- **Meeting resettlement needs**, for example in Zambia.<sup>32</sup>
- **Improving access to services** for those without renewed documentation in Egypt.<sup>33</sup>
- **Ensuring integrated health plans** to provide refugee access to protective equipment and vaccinations in Ethiopia.<sup>34</sup>
- **Developing a more focused and defined advocacy strategy** in Zambia.<sup>35</sup>

#### 4. How coherent has UNHCR's response been so far?

Evaluations find that many actors scaled down their in-country presence, limiting scope for UNHCR to engage with them in the usual way.<sup>36</sup> However, findings so far on coherence are positive and include:

- **Increased dialogue with NGOs** (at global level).<sup>37</sup>
- **Improved relationship with governments** in the Venezuela response.<sup>38</sup>
- **Successful collective UN efforts** (UNHCR, UNRC and IOM) to reduce the space between refugee, asylum seeker and migrant.<sup>39</sup>

#### 5. Opportunities presented by COVID-19

While the COVID 19 pandemic has produced significant challenges, some opportunities emerge that UNHCR could seize. The most significant are:

- Scope to highlight the plight of **stateless persons**.<sup>40</sup>
- Increased policy space/opening up of **policies on service integration** for refugees.<sup>41</sup>
- The **expansion of social protection systems** for PoC inclusion in e.g. Jordan and Egypt.<sup>42</sup>
- **Scope to leverage enhanced reputation** in contexts where UNHCR has delivered effective and efficient responses, for example leveraging respect earned in advocating for inclusive policies or refugee protection.<sup>43</sup>

#### 6. What factors enabled UNHCR's Response?

Factors which facilitated UNHCR's response to COVID 19 included:

- **Operational agility**, which enabled relatively swift adaptation when the pandemic struck.
- **The use of emergency mechanisms**, which prioritised the response and enabled greater flexibility in funding arrangements.<sup>44</sup>
- **UNHCR's human capital**, which, despite significant stresses and strain on staff, as in the Venezuela response, helped deliver an agile response.<sup>45</sup>

#### 7. What constrained UNHCR's Response?

- **Reversion to emergency response** and consequent de-prioritisation of other issues such as statelessness/ economic inclusion.<sup>46</sup>
- **Earmarked funding**, which restricted the ability to respond to immediate needs.<sup>47</sup>
- **Competing priorities** and a lack of clarity on UNHCR's roles on different fronts.<sup>48</sup>

## End Note: COVID 19 Synthesis

### Methodology:

Analysis and evidence in this brief were produced by extracting relevant findings from UNHCR's available evaluations and plotting them onto an analytical framework.

Readers should note that this is an interim product and does not constitute a final synthesis report which is expected in April 2022.

The final report will incorporate evidence from additional evaluations as they are finalized over the course of the next several months.

### Contact us

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## Links and References

The following evaluations were consulted for this brief:

- [Evaluation of UNHCR led Initiatives to End Statelessness](#)
- [Evaluation of the UNHCR Regional Refugee Response to the Venezuela Situation](#)
- [Independent Evaluation of the UNHCR Innovation Fund](#)
- Multi-Year Evaluation of UNHCR's Engagement in Humanitarian-Development Cooperation (*final report forthcoming*)
- Evaluation of UNHCR's Country Operation in Egypt (*final report forthcoming*)
- Evaluation of UNHCR's Country Operation in Zambia (*final report forthcoming*)

Interested Readers may also wish to consult:

- [UNHCR's Evaluation Policy](#)
- [UNHCR's Approach to Evaluation COVID 19](#)
- [UNHCR's Evaluation Work- Plan](#)



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- <sup>1</sup> Evaluation of the UNHCR Regional Refugee Response to the Venezuela Situation, Evaluation of UNHCR's Country Operation in Egypt, Evaluation of UNHCR's Country Operation in Zambia
- <sup>2</sup> Evaluation of UNHCR's Country Operation in Egypt, Evaluation of UNHCR's Country Operation in Zambia
- <sup>3</sup> Evaluation of the UNHCR Regional Refugee Response to the Venezuela Situation
- <sup>4</sup> Evaluation of the UNHCR Regional Refugee Response to the Venezuela Situation
- <sup>5</sup> Evaluation of the UNHCR Regional Refugee Response to the Venezuela Situation, Evaluation of UNHCR's Country Operation in Zambia, Multi-Year Evaluation of UNHCR's Engagement in Humanitarian-Development Cooperation
- <sup>6</sup> Evaluation of the UNHCR Regional Refugee Response to the Venezuela Situation
- <sup>7</sup> Evaluation of the UNHCR Regional Refugee Response to the Venezuela Situation, Evaluation of UNHCR's Country Operation in Egypt, Evaluation of UNHCR's Country Operation in Zambia, Evaluation of UNHCR led Initiatives to End Statelessness
- <sup>8</sup> Evaluation of UNHCR's Country Operation in Egypt
- <sup>9</sup> Evaluation of UNHCR's Country Operation in Egypt
- <sup>10</sup> Evaluation of the UNHCR Regional Refugee Response to the Venezuela Situation
- <sup>11</sup> Evaluation of UNHCR's Country Operation in Zambia, Evaluation of the UNHCR Regional Refugee Response to the Venezuela Situation, Multi-Year Evaluation of UNHCR's Engagement in Humanitarian-Development Cooperation, Evaluation of UNHCR led Initiatives to End Statelessness, Evaluation of UNHCR's Country Operation in Egypt
- <sup>12</sup> Evaluation of the UNHCR Regional Refugee Response to the Venezuela Situation
- <sup>13</sup> Multi-Year Evaluation of UNHCR's Engagement in Humanitarian-Development Cooperation
- <sup>14</sup> Evaluation of the UNHCR Regional Refugee Response to the Venezuela Situation
- <sup>15</sup> Evaluation of UNHCR's Country Operation in Zambia
- <sup>16</sup> Multi-Year Evaluation of UNHCR's Engagement in Humanitarian-Development Cooperation
- <sup>17</sup> All Evaluation considered organisational relevance excluding the Evaluation of the Innovation Fund.
- <sup>18</sup> Multi-Year Evaluation of UNHCR's Engagement in Humanitarian-Development Cooperation
- <sup>19</sup> Independent Evaluation of the UNHCR Innovation Fund
- <sup>20</sup> Evaluation of the UNHCR Regional Refugee Response to the Venezuela Situation
- <sup>21</sup> Evaluation of the UNHCR Regional Refugee Response to the Venezuela Situation, Evaluation of UNHCR's Country Operation in Zambia, Evaluation of UNHCR's Country Operation in Egypt, Jordan (Multi-Year Evaluation of UNHCR's Engagement in Humanitarian-Development Cooperation)
- <sup>22</sup> Evaluation of the UNHCR Regional Refugee Response to the Venezuela Situation
- <sup>23</sup> Evaluation of UNHCR led Initiatives to End Statelessness
- <sup>24</sup> Evaluation of UNHCR's Country Operation in Zambia, Evaluation of the UNHCR Regional Refugee Response to the Venezuela Situation
- <sup>25</sup> Evaluation of the UNHCR Regional Refugee Response to the Venezuela Situation, Multi-Year Evaluation of UNHCR's Engagement in Humanitarian-Development Cooperation, Evaluation of UNHCR led Initiatives to End Statelessness
- <sup>26</sup> Evaluation of the UNHCR Regional Refugee Response to the Venezuela Situation
- <sup>27</sup> Evaluation of the UNHCR Regional Refugee Response to the Venezuela Situation, Evaluation of UNHCR's Country Operation in Zambia, Bangladesh and Niger (Multi-Year Evaluation of UNHCR's Engagement in Humanitarian-Development Cooperation)
- <sup>28</sup> Evaluation of UNHCR's Country Operation in Zambia
- <sup>29</sup> Evaluation of the UNHCR Regional Refugee Response to the Venezuela Situation Evaluation of UNHCR's Country Operation in Zambia, Evaluation of UNHCR's Country Operation in Egypt, Jordan (Multi-Year Evaluation of UNHCR's Engagement in Humanitarian-Development Cooperation)
- <sup>30</sup> Evaluation of UNHCR's Country Operation in Egypt, Evaluation of the UNHCR Regional Refugee Response to the Venezuela Situation
- <sup>31</sup> Evaluation of the UNHCR Regional Refugee Response to the Venezuela Situation
- <sup>32</sup> Evaluation of UNHCR's Country Operation in Zambia
- <sup>33</sup> Evaluation of UNHCR's Country Operation in Egypt
- <sup>34</sup> Multi-Year Evaluation of UNHCR's Engagement in Humanitarian-Development Cooperation
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- <sup>38</sup> Evaluation of the UNHCR Regional Refugee Response to the Venezuela Situation
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- <sup>40</sup> Evaluation of the UNHCR Regional Refugee Response to the Venezuela Situation
- <sup>41</sup> Multi-Year Evaluation of UNHCR's Engagement in Humanitarian-Development Cooperation
- <sup>42</sup> Multi-Year Evaluation of UNHCR's Engagement in Humanitarian-Development Cooperation, Evaluation of UNHCR's Country Operation in Egypt
- <sup>43</sup> Multi-Year Evaluation of UNHCR's Engagement in Humanitarian-Development Cooperation
- <sup>44</sup> Evaluation of the UNHCR Regional Refugee Response to the Venezuela Situation
- <sup>45</sup> Evaluation of the UNHCR Regional Refugee Response to the Venezuela Situation
- <sup>46</sup> Evaluation of UNHCR led Initiatives to End Statelessness
- <sup>47</sup> Multi-Year Evaluation of UNHCR's Engagement in Humanitarian-Development Cooperation
- <sup>48</sup> All Evaluation consulted excluding Evaluation of the Innovation Fund