



MOPAN

Multilateral Organisation
Performance Assessment Network

Synthesis report

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)

Executive Summary · 2014



MOPAN

Executive summary

This report presents the findings of an assessment of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) conducted by the Multilateral Organisation Performance Assessment Network (MOPAN). MOPAN reports provide an assessment of four dimensions of organisational effectiveness (strategic management, operational management, relationship management, and knowledge management), an assessment of the organisation's relevance and reporting on its humanitarian results, and snapshots of UNHCR performance in each of the five countries included in the survey.

UNHCR was established by the United Nations General Assembly in 1950 in recognition of the United Nations' responsibility to protect refugees in the aftermath of the Second World War. Since then, resolutions of the General Assembly and the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) have further developed the organisation's mandate: refining its responsibilities with respect to refugees and asylum-seekers; formalising its functions regarding returnees and stateless persons; and conferring it authority under certain conditions to engage with internally displaced persons.

The UN General Assembly and ECOSOC set policy directives for the organisation. An Executive Committee (ExCom) of member states (currently 94) provides executive and advisory functions that include reviewing and approving the organisation's biennial programmes and budget and authorising the High Commissioner to make appeals for funds. The High Commissioner, appointed by the General Assembly, is responsible for the direction and control of the organisation and reports annually to ECOSOC and the General Assembly on UNHCR's work.

UNHCR is headquartered in Geneva, Switzerland and operates in 123 countries with a workforce of more than 9 000 employees. Centralised administrative functions are handled by the Global Service Centre in Budapest, Hungary.

UNHCR's corporate strategic plan (the Global Appeal) includes a set of Global Strategic Priorities (GSPs) that underscore areas of critical concern in pursuing its mandate to provide protection and assistance and to seek permanent solutions for refugees and other persons of concern. UNHCR's current strategic plan (2014-2015) includes eight operational strategic priorities and a set of support and management priorities to enhance organisational effectiveness (e.g. financial accountability, protection, humanitarian co-ordination, results-based management, and preparedness and response).

UNHCR receives a small annual subsidy from the United Nations regular budget that partially covers its management and administrative costs and obtains the bulk of its funding from voluntary contributions from donor governments, inter-governmental institutions, non-governmental organisations and the private sector (i.e. corporations, foundations and citizens).

In 2006, UNHCR set out on a far-reaching internal reform process to increase its efficiency and improve its delivery. In recent years, UNHCR has been working to consolidate and fine-tune reforms, focusing on results-based planning and budgeting, regionalisation, human resource management, support to operations, and oversight and accountability.

MOPAN assessment

MOPAN conducted one previous assessment of UNHCR in 2011.

The 2014 assessment is based on information collected through a survey of key stakeholders, document review, and interviews with UNHCR staff. The survey respondents included UNHCR's direct partners, MOPAN donors based in-country and at headquarters, and host government and peer organisations in countries where UNHCR has operations. Five countries were included in the MOPAN survey of UNHCR: Bangladesh, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ecuador, Kenya and Tanzania.

A total of 214 respondents participated in the survey (34 MOPAN donors based at headquarters, 34 donors based in-country, 78 direct partners, 19 host government representatives, and 49 representatives of peer organisations). The document review examined more than 400 documents. Interviews were held with 24 UNHCR staff members at headquarters and 10 from country offices.

The main findings of the institutional assessment of UNHCR are summarised below.

Key findings

Strategic management

MOPAN established five key performance indicators (KPI) in the area of strategic management, which address the organisation's leadership on the results agenda and capacities for developing and following institutional and country strategies that reflect good practices in managing for results.

UNHCR is viewed as an organisation whose senior management and values emphasise the achievement of humanitarian results. Since the 2011 MOPAN review, UNHCR has taken steps to embrace results-based management but more work is required to support its effective application in UNHCR operations.

Among the four cross-cutting priorities examined by MOPAN, UNHCR was considered strong in mainstreaming gender equality and integrating emergency preparedness and response. Its support for environmental sustainability and good governance received mixed ratings. It is important to note that the MOPAN criteria examine the organisation's policies and strategies in these areas, not their implementation.

UNHCR country strategies are based on reliable needs assessments and provide causal links from inputs to outputs/outcomes. A key shortcoming relates to the design, funding, and update of contingency plans.

The review identified several limitations in UNHCR's strategic management performance. One relates to how UNHCR translates its mandate into operational priorities/objectives. While UNHCR has a clear mandate that is valued by stakeholders, the document review highlighted several ambiguities in its corporate strategy (the Global Appeal) since it does not clearly explain the rationale behind the elements presented (e.g. the choice of GSPs, the proposed indicators) and the link between the Global Appeal and the Results Framework, and between the GSPs and the anticipated areas of intervention. These omissions limit the Global Appeal's clarity and utility in guiding UNHCR in implementing its mandate strategically. While some of this information is briefly presented in other documents, these explanations are needed in the Global Appeal document itself so that the strategy is comprehensible and complete.

A second limitation relates to a disconnection between the short-term nature of the corporate strategy (two years) and the protracted refugee contexts within which UNHCR and other humanitarian organisations increasingly are operating, which may require longer term strategic plans and commitments to support the realisation of durable solutions in the lives of refugees and other persons of concern.

A third limitation relates to how UNHCR links its corporate results framework with its strategic plan. UNHCR has a complex results architecture that comprises a corporate results framework, GSPs, as well as emerging results frameworks for UNHCR's global programmes and some headquarter technical divisions. The multiplicity of frameworks creates challenges in tracking, reporting on and analysing UNHCR's performance on an organisation-wide basis.

Operational management

MOPAN established eight key indicators in the area of operational management, which refers to managing operations in a way that is performance-oriented, thus ensuring organisational accountability for resources and results.

The assessment found that UNHCR's greatest overall strength in operational management is its continuing delegation of authority for operational and management decision making to countries and, over the past several years, to regional offices as well. Delegation of authority was recognised positively in the 2011 and 2014 MOPAN reviews and UNHCR plans to continue to pursue decentralisation objectives in the future. However, some stakeholders expressed concern that UNHCR headquarters has become too lean and that resources to support the field and ensure internal controls are overstretched.

Another operational strength is the conformity of UNHCR's external audit processes with recognised international standards at organisation-wide, country and project levels.

Findings of the 2011 and 2014 reviews are consistent in terms of human resource management. UNHCR was commended for its staff security processes and staff code of conduct but there is a need for a more transparent staff performance appraisal system that links staff performance and opportunities for career development. UNHCR plans to revise its Performance Appraisal and Management Systems (PAMS) in 2014/15. The document review rated UNHCR very strong for its staff protection practices and systems.

Although stakeholders recognise UNHCR as a strong supporter of humanitarian principles, the organisation's documents do not emphasise these principles and UNHCR has not defined accountability for their application or monitoring.

Other areas requiring continued attention include: tracking expenditures by results at the operational and organisational levels (also a finding of the 2011 MOPAN review); more transparent processes to prioritise country-level funding allocations and decisions; following up on poorly performing programmes; and tracking performance in addressing evaluation recommendations.

UNHCR has taken steps to address and apply the tenets of the Transformative Agenda, and plans to continue. However, it has made little progress in responding to the Quadrennial Comprehensive Policy Review.

Relationship management

MOPAN established four performance indicators in the area of relationship management, which refers to how the organisation is working with others.

Relationship management is a critical performance area for UNHCR given the broad consensus that is needed for refugee work in general, and given the increasing reliance on partners for programme implementation. It is also important given the increasing emphasis and value placed on collaboration, co-ordination, communication and joint actions by humanitarian assistance actors (implementing and operational partners alike) to respond more efficiently and effectively to the needs of refugees and other persons of concern including internally displaced persons (IDP).

Positive highlights identified through the document review and/or survey include: UNHCR's ability to respond quickly to changing circumstances; the quality of UNHCR's policy dialogue; its use of advocacy to enhance protection for refugees and other persons of concern; and its procedures which respondents generally considered easy to follow.

Respondents rated UNHCR as adequate with regard to how it engages with partners in policy dialogue and supports capacity development. UNHCR is an active contributor to inter-agency plans and appeals and collaborates with main operational partners (such as the World Food Programme) at various stages of the humanitarian programme cycle. The document review noted variations in the clarity of monitoring and evaluation arrangements with its partners. Actions taken by UNHCR with its partners since 2011 to clarify and improve partnership relations, arrangements and agreements (under the umbrella of the Enhanced Framework for Implementing Partners) are encouraging.

Continued UNHCR investment in cluster management and more time are required to realise demonstrable improvements in how clusters are led or co-led by UNHCR, and in how UNHCR co-ordinates with other operational partners. Recent steps taken to formalise the accountability interface between UNHCR's co-ordination of refugee response and OCHA's co-ordination of the broader humanitarian response are promising.

Knowledge management

MOPAN developed three key performance indicators to examine an organisation's feedback and reporting mechanisms as well as learning strategies that facilitate the sharing of knowledge and performance information. An organisation's ability to capture and effectively use knowledge to deliver its intended results is an important factor in its continued relevance and success (the Learning Organisation concept).

Surveyed stakeholders considered UNHCR adequate overall in knowledge management. The document review found that the organisation's evaluation function has accomplished a great deal despite modest financial resources, but identified several areas for improvement. As also noted in the 2011 review, although there is evidence of UNHCR's commitment to address noted shortcomings, the data raised concerns about UNHCR's ability to address limitations without adequate resources, management buy-in and increased structural independence of the evaluation function. As was the case in the 2011 MOPAN review, the document review also flagged several areas for improvement in how UNHCR reports on its performance (particularly in terms of outcomes and impacts at the organisation-wide level) and how it captures and utilises lessons learned to inform organisational work processes and programmes.

UNHCR's relevance and humanitarian results

UNHCR results are relevant to stakeholders in the complex environments in which it operates. UNHCR has adapted over time to ensure the protection and rights of the growing numbers of refugees and other persons of concern. It has a valued reputation for leadership in convening NGOs, UN sister agencies, experts, and states to help set global priorities. MOPAN perception data and documents consulted on UNHCR's practices present evidence that UNHCR is pursuing results relevant to its mandate that are aligned with global humanitarian trends and priorities and that respond to the needs and priorities of beneficiaries.

MOPAN survey respondents and UNHCR Global Reports indicate that UNHCR has made progress towards its organisation-wide results. However, current reporting practices and the lack of documented evidence available on the organisation's contributions to results make it difficult to have a clear and comprehensive picture of these achievements. This is due to the partial reporting on UNHCR's corporate results, the complexity of results frameworks, and insufficient numbers of evaluation reports.

In contrast to its reporting on organisational progress, UNHCR provides richer data and narratives on the contributions it makes at the country level. MOPAN survey respondents in each country also view that the organisation is making adequate or strong contributions in all its rights groups. Documentary evidence across the sample of five countries indicates that UNHCR is achieving its planned results at the output level and making partial progress towards expected objectives.

Conclusions

UNHCR is a unique multilateral agency that, since its founding in 1950, has adapted to vastly changed world circumstances and humanitarian needs. UNHCR's relevance is not in doubt. However, UNHCR is not immune to the considerable challenges of 21st century organisational development.

Since the MOPAN assessment in 2011, UNHCR has faced a dynamic operational context that has placed significant demands on the organisation's capacities. It has sought to meet the challenges but not without difficulty.

UNHCR has a relevant, clear and valued mandate that has evolved over time to protect, provide assistance and seek permanent solutions for refugees as well as other persons of concern.

As was also found in the 2011 MOPAN assessment, UNHCR's corporate strategy and results frameworks do not fully define, communicate, guide or monitor how its mandate is translated into organisation-wide results. UNHCR has operationalised results-based management (RBM) through a complex system that has several limitations.

UNHCR is perceived to make contributions to humanitarian results, but neither its reports nor its performance measurement systems provide a clear and complete picture of how it is improving the circumstances and well-being of persons of concern. UNHCR corporate reports do not yet aggregate results over time, geographic regions, and rights groups. As with other organisations engaged in humanitarian action, there is room for improvement in the use of evidence in decision making and reporting.

Over the past few years UNHCR has been working actively to improve its relationships with its implementing and operational partners. Recent developments in co-ordination of mixed refugee situations are promising, but UNHCR is not yet identified as strong in partnering effectively with other humanitarian organisations.

UNHCR has taken steps to address and apply the tenets of the Transformative Agenda, and plans to continue. However, it has made little progress in responding to the Quadrennial Comprehensive Policy Review.

Overall MOPAN ratings of UNHCR

The two charts below show the ratings on the key performance indicators that MOPAN used to assess UNHCR in 2014. The first chart shows the ratings on 20 indicators designed to measure organisational effectiveness (practices and systems), and the second chart shows ratings on the three indicators designed to assess UNHCR's relevance, and evidence of progress towards organisational and country-level results.

Organisational effectiveness– overall ratings

Strategic management	Survey respondents	Document review
KPI-1 Providing direction for results	4.65	4
KPI-2 Corporate strategy based on clear mandate	4.83	4
KPI-3 Corporate focus on results	N/A	3
KPI-4 Focus on cross-cutting priorities	4.47	4
KPI-5 Country focus on results	4.38	5
Operational management		
KPI-6 Transparent and timely funding	4.18	3
KPI-7 Results-based budgeting	3.94	4
KPI-8 Financial accountability	4.57	4
KPI-9 Using performance information	4.26	3
KPI-10 Managing human resources	4.38	5
KPI-11 Performance-oriented programming	N/A	4
KPI-12 Delegating authority	4.57	5
KPI-13 Humanitarian principles and protection approach	4.81	4
Relationship management		
KPI-14 Adjusting to local conditions and capacities	4.36	N/A
KPI-15 Contributing to policy dialogue	4.62	N/A
KPI-16 Cluster management	4.43	4
KPI-18 Harmonising procedures	4.46	4
Knowledge management		
KPI-19 Evaluating results	4.11	3
KPI-20 Presenting performance information	4.40	3
KPI-21 Disseminating lessons learned	4.05	4

Legend

Strong or above	4.50–6.00
Adequate	3.50–4.49
Inadequate or below	1.00–3.49
Document review data unavailable	◆
Not assessed	N/A

Relevance and evidence of progress towards results – overall ratings**Relevance and results**

KPI A: Evidence of UNHCR's relevance

Assessment Rating

Strong

KPI B: Evidence of progress towards organisation-wide results

Inadequate

KPI D: Evidence of progress towards UNHCR stated country-level results

Adequate

 Weak  Inadequate  Adequate  Strong