

MOPAN
2017-18 ASSESSMENTS

Organisational Performance Brief

**Office of the United Nations
High Commissioner for Refugees
(UNHCR)**

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UNHCR's performance at a glance

UNHCR's operations in an increasingly challenging context are facilitated by a strong organisational identity and shared understanding of the organisation's *raison d'être*. As was widely reported in the media, thanks in large part to UNHCR's advocacy and knowledge generation, the number of forcibly displaced people reached an all-time high of 68.5 million in 2018 after six years of consecutive increase.¹ UNHCR continues to request funds based on increasing global needs, but funding has not kept pace and so the organisation faces increasing budget shortfalls. Part of what helps UNHCR stay the course in this context is that it has a very clear mandate based on the 1951 Refugee Convention and the 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees. With this specific and enduring mission, protection and human rights were described by staff as "what we do" and "part of our DNA". This translates well into results in these areas, as well as into these areas being mainstreamed across UNHCR's work, despite a difficult operational context.

Many of UNHCR's comparative advantages are well capitalised on, with success particularly in normative work, ensuring legal rights and protection. Strong identity and understanding of what UNHCR is meant to do translates into success around the areas more particular to its comparative advantage. This is seen not only in the limited evaluative evidence of results achieved, but also in UNHCR's widely respected role as an advocate for persons of concern,² enabling humanitarian access and helping ensure respect for legal and human rights. UNHCR is also well-respected for its knowledge generation, including products like the Global Needs Assessment that have relevance across the international system.

In spite of a clear long-term vision, UNHCR's strategic structure lacks coherence and clear linkages to results. The long-term vision of UNHCR is set out in its mandate which, as mentioned above, has a strong basis in international legal instruments. The strategic architecture, however, is less clear. UNHCR's broad strategy is articulated in its Strategic Directions 2017-2021, which set out an overarching direction for the organisation. This is complemented by the more operational Global Strategic Priorities (GSPs) that are conceptually, but not explicitly, connected to the Strategic Directions. The Strategic Directions do not have a clear link to results while the GSPs are based on, but are not completely congruent with, UNHCR's results framework. This lack of clarity impedes the usability and ownership of both the strategic architecture and the results framework.

Results-based management (RBM) continues to evolve, but there is still a lack of clarity and organisation-wide buy-in. UNHCR has been in a process of reforming its RBM for some time, and the current set of reforms is expected to continue through 2020. There are signs of positive evolution, with the Focus tool in particular providing insights into costing for results by linking up financial and programming systems. However, there is still room for improvement as the RBM systems lack comprehensive linkages to the strategic architecture and as there is no single document that provides clear costs for all management results. Technical challenges to aggregation also remain, so granular results at the corporate level are not readily available. Interviews indicated that in some cases staff questioned the usability of these systems and even employed their own parallel systems. Furthermore, while UNHCR's architecture is well connected to the

UNHCR KEY FACTS

MISSION: UNHCR was created in 1950 and serves as the guardian of the 1951 Refugee Convention and the 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees, which set clear expectations for state co-operation in ensuring that the rights of refugees are respected and protected.

GOVERNANCE: UNHCR is governed by the United Nations General Assembly and the Economic and Social Council. The UNHCR Executive Committee (ExCom) approves the organisation's biennial programmes and the corresponding budget. The Standing Committee meets several times each year to continue to implement the work of the ExCom.

STRUCTURE: Headquartered in Geneva, as of May 2018 UNHCR had 11 517 national and international staff working in 128 countries. Eighty-seven percent of UNHCR's staff are based in field locations.

FINANCE: Funds available totalled USD 4 510 million in 2017. The vast majority of UNHCR's funding comes from voluntary contributions. Budgetary requirements have risen steadily in recent years; however, funds available have remained consistently below requirements (a gap of just over 43% in 2017).

1: See UNHCR Figures at a Glance, <https://www.unhcr.org/figures-at-a-glance.html>.

2: Persons of concern include people who have been forcibly displaced (refugees, asylum-seekers and internally displaced persons), those who have found a durable solution (returnees), as well as stateless persons, most of whom have never been forcibly displaced (<http://reporting.unhcr.org/population>).

normative tools at the heart of its mandate, connections to other global standards, most notably links to the Sustainable Development Goals, remain in development.

UNHCR has a strong ethos of partnership and uses clear criteria to establish relationships. UNHCR works with more than 1 000 implementing partners, channelling USD 1.5 billion through them in 2017. It has a range of co-ordination mechanisms with partners, frequently establishes memoranda of understanding, and lays out clear criteria for selecting partners, including on capacity and financial transparency. UNHCR also works with other organisations for key assessments, including the Global Needs Assessment, and even has an indicator in the GSPs to measure whether “multi-year, multi-partner strategies are informed by improved joint needs assessments and are developed and implemented in consultation with key stakeholders”.

However, the organisation’s mandate around co-ordination is a huge responsibility that is not always well executed. UNHCR not only leads or co-leads three Global Clusters for humanitarian emergencies, but it is also mandated with co-ordinating the overall response under the refugee co-ordination model. The scope of UNHCR’s co-ordinating responsibility, under the latter mandate in particular, is immense. While UNHCR continues to make strides in co-ordinating at the strategic level, including through clarification of its division of labour with the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, evaluations point to significant room for improvement in operational co-ordination with sister UN agencies and other actors. Shortcomings include poor or lack of communication with UN partners, unsystematised co-ordination structures and a lack of joint planning.

UNHCR is “close to the ground”, and its interventions are relevant and well-aligned to needs. UNHCR has a good track record of working with national partners and ensuring that its interventions are well-aligned to country-level needs. These relationships and the organisation having 87% of its staff based in the field also contribute to its success in particularly difficult contexts and in its more normative roles, including guaranteeing legal rights of persons of concern.

Accountability to affected populations (AAP) is a clear organisational strength. UNHCR has rigorous systems and procedures for AAP in place and also leads high-level dialogue on this issue, including as co-chair of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee Task Team on AAP. Specific programmatic guidance is set out in UNHCR’s Emergency Handbook and Programme Manual, both of which require

participatory assessments to be conducted for intervention design. There are also requirements in place to ensure AAP standards are followed by implementing partners, and staff have indicated that training is extensively carried out across the organisation. While there is some room for improvement in ensuring that UNHCR communicates effectively to persons of concern, UNHCR is quite strong on AAP overall and is also taking steps to improve monitoring and evaluation of AAP.

UNHCR is constrained by its finances but is making strong efforts to diversify its funding base and attract more flexible financing. Heavy reliance on voluntary contributions, a few key donors and extensive earmarking present challenges for UNHCR. The organisation’s needs-based budgets require frequent adjustments and are, in practice, dependent on resources for prioritised implementation. UNHCR is, however, making strides toward a more robust funding base. It is exploring new markets and making significant growth, particularly in raising funds from the private sector. The Private Sector Partnership Service is UNHCR’s third largest source of income, accounting for 10% of the total funds raised in 2017 and comprising a key source of unearmarked funds. The effort to attract multi-year funding, including through specific incentives, has intensified as well.

Financial management and accountability systems are mostly robust. UNHCR has rigorous internal and external audit systems that comply with international standards. Systems around financial fraud and accountability are likewise robust, though these would benefit from establishing clear ownership of controls and responsibility for monitoring. UNHCR has developed numerous training modules and handbooks, including a course on fraud and corruption awareness. However, this particular course is not mandatory and has limited uptake. Given UNHCR’s operating model, and in particular the growing trend of utilising cash-based assistance as a modality, ensuring these systems continue to strengthen is essential.

Recent attention to risk management represents a positive trend. UNHCR has made significant strides in risk management through its High-Level Internal Control Framework, Management Implications Reports and new Risk 2.0 approach. These endeavours have helped to highlight systemic weaknesses and policy gaps as well as systemise UNHCR’s approach and raise the profile of risk management for staff. Again, these developments are extremely timely in the context of UNHCR’s operating model and in particular the risks raised by auditors stemming from the use of cash-based transfers, including through implementing partners, in large-scale emergency responses.

The evaluation function has made recent strides but still does not meet the required standards of the UN system. Under the current Strategic Directions and a revised evaluation policy from 2016, UNHCR has expanded coverage of evaluations and implemented an improved policy architecture, for example around quality assurance. It will take time for the full results of this improved system to be seen, but the trend is positive. However, the evaluation function is still not fully independent structurally, budgetarily or in deciding the evaluation programme, and planned reforms do not clearly address this issue. Use of evaluative findings to inform design is also variable, as is tracking of recommendations, though there are positive signs of increasing feedback loops and monitoring. Still, UNHCR's internal knowledge management and learning systems remain for the moment largely informal and tacit.

UNHCR achieves results for persons of concern, though with some missed opportunities. Evidence reviewed showed particular success in achieving results related to protection and human rights, core areas of UNHCR's work, as well as in providing lifesaving assistance and basic services on a large scale. However, numerous missed opportunities and shortcomings were also evident. Evaluations report that UNHCR placed priority on service delivery over policy-focused engagement, which may be viewed as taking a reactionary rather than strategic approach.

Durable solutions and efficient delivery remain challenges, though UNHCR has made recent efforts to improve. Although UNHCR's emphasis on life-saving activities must be understood in the context of its consistent budgetary constraints, achieving durable solutions and demonstrating efficient delivery were elusive in almost all evaluative evidence reviewed. Rather than just having short-term programming cycles and insufficient capacity strengthening, though these are also identified as shortcomings, UNHCR is described as having a "short-term mindset" that impedes a more sustainable and strategic approach. Evidence from evaluations shows considerable scope for improvement on efficiency and timeliness as well, with some underlying factors within UNHCR's control, including poor co-ordination, weak case management and slowness in scaling-up responses when conditions require. UNHCR has, however, made some recent efforts to improve sustainability in particular, including through the creation of the Division of Resilience and Solutions and new partnerships with development actors such as the World Bank and the United Nations Development Programme.

Attention to gender equality, good governance, and environmental sustainability and climate change is variable. While the policy framework for gender has been recently refreshed, resources for comprehensive mainstreaming are lacking and there is a need to see the issue beyond only sexual and gender-based violence. Good governance, understood for UNHCR mainly as capacity strengthening, is a largely implicit agenda – although evaluations attest to considerable efforts made, these are not always framed within a comprehensive or systems-oriented approach. Environmental sustainability and climate change are emerging agendas. Operationally, the mainstreaming of gender equality, good governance, and the environment and climate change is heavily dependent on staff willingness, interest and commitment to apply them. Few tangible incentives, and limited financial and human resources, are available to ensure their comprehensive mainstreaming.

UNHCR has recognised a need for reform and is in the process of changing. Most of UNHCR's operations and staff are based in the field; however, many of its functions are centralised, which has led to concerns about procedural blockages, internal coherence and the organisation becoming excessively bureaucratic. In response, UNHCR commissioned an external review in 2017 that led to the ongoing comprehensive change process. The change management process aims to improve the organisation's effectiveness and efficiency through: a) restructuring of headquarters coupled with the creation of new divisions responding to ongoing challenges, b) streamlined policy architecture for organisational coherence and simplicity and c) the decentralisation of expertise, functions, structures and resources. While change is still underway, recent efforts as described above show a positive trajectory.

Commitment to seeing reforms through and to adjusting their course are essential as demands on UNHCR are likely to continue increasing. Though the impact on UNHCR's work is not entirely clear at the time of the assessment, UNHCR's central role in the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework and Global Compact for Refugees is clear and means demands on the organisation are only likely to increase. While recent and ongoing reforms, as well as senior-level buy-in, augur well for the near-term, UNHCR's situation requires careful navigation and continued commitment to ensure that the organisation is fit to meet the challenges it faces currently and will face in the future.

Key findings

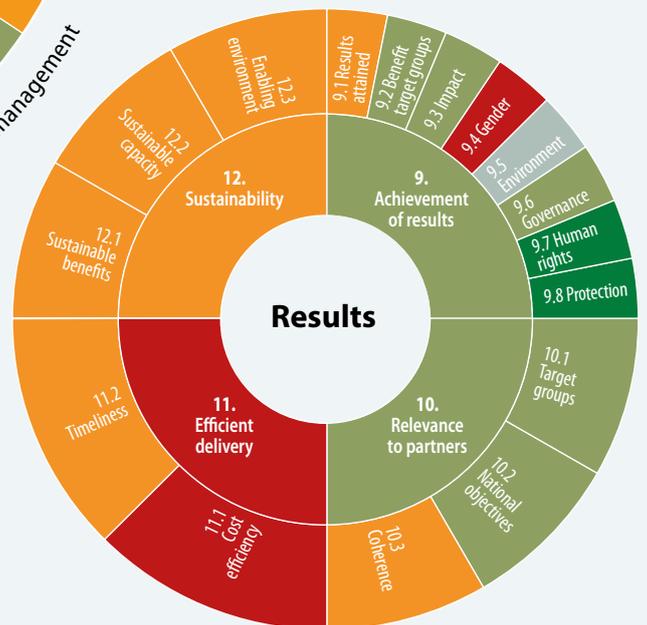
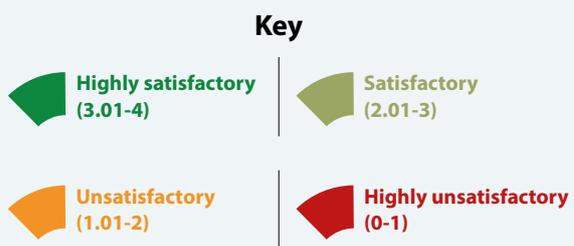
Overall, this assessment finds that the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) is relatively well-performing and its trajectory of change is positive. Recognising both external and internal challenges, particularly to agility, efficiency and headquarter coherence, the organisation began implementing a comprehensive change management process in 2017. This prioritises greater coherence at headquarters and improved decentralisation of

key functions and processes. Change is well underway and, though not yet complete, this assessment finds that UNHCR is committed to reform.

The assessment also finds that UNHCR has built on the strengths and areas for improvement identified in its previous MOPAN assessment. Many of its strengths remain similar, including the relevance of its mandate and interventions and its reputation for quality knowledge generation, advocacy and policy dialogue. This assessment also highlights its human rights and protection focus, efforts to broaden the donor base, and recently

strengthened risk management systems. The organisation has also made gains, or is in the process of reforming, a number of key areas for improvement identified in the 2014 assessment, including relationships with operating partners and the use of evidence in decision-making. Two areas for improvement from the previous assessment remain: structural dependence of the evaluation function and the lack of linkage between UNHCR's Results Framework and its strategic plan.

PERFORMANCE RATING SUMMARY



About this assessment

The Multilateral Organisation Performance Assessment Network (MOPAN) is a network of 18 countries³ who share a common interest in assessing the effectiveness of the major multilateral organisations they fund, including UN agencies, international financial institutions and global funds. The Network generates, collects, analyses and presents relevant and credible information on the organisational and development effectiveness of the organisations it assesses. This knowledge base is intended to contribute to organisational learning within and among the organisations, their direct clients and partners, and other stakeholders. Network members use the reports for their own accountability needs and as a source of input for strategic decision-making.

UNHCR is one of the 14 organisations assessed by MOPAN in 2017-18. This is the third MOPAN assessment of UNHCR; the previous assessments were conducted in 2011 and 2014. Korea acted as the institutional lead country, representing MOPAN members in this assessment process.

This brief accompanies the full assessment published in early 2019, which can be found on MOPAN's website at www.mopanonline.org. UNHCR's management response will be made available there as well.

The assessment of performance covers UNHCR's headquarters, and regional and country field presence. It addresses organisational systems, practices and behaviours, as well as results achieved during the period 2016 to mid-2018. It relies on three lines of evidence: a document review, interviews with staff and small groups, and an online partner survey.⁴

MOPAN's evidence lines for UNHCR

- Review of 245 documents
- 80+ staff interviews / consultations
- 170 partners surveyed in 11 countries

The MOPAN 3.0 methodology entails a framework of 12 key performance indicators and associated micro-indicators. It comprises standards that characterise an effective multilateral organisation. More detail is provided in MOPAN's methodology manual.⁵

Organisations assessed by MOPAN in 2017-18:

- ADB
- GEF
- IFAD
- OHCHR
- UNESCO
- UNHCR
- WFP
- FAO
- GPE
- IOM
- UN Women
- UNFPA
- UNRWA
- WHO

3: Australia, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Korea, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, the United Kingdom and the United States – and two observers, New Zealand and the United Arab Emirates.

4: The survey was conducted between March and April 2018, drawn from UNHCR partners in 11 countries: Bangladesh, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, Guinea, Jordan, Lebanon, Mexico, Myanmar, Pakistan, Tunisia and Turkey.

5: Available at www.mopanonline.org