

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



OVERALL PERFORMANCE REFLECTIONS

Conflicts are increasingly protracted, new wars are spreading and global challenges like climate change are already creating significant knock-on effects for forced displacement situations. The human consequences of these factors are immense and growing. And yet, the multilateral system's capacity to respond is being constrained by the growing complexity of the operating environment, deteriorating levels of trust, and funding constraints and inefficiencies.

In this difficult geopolitical environment, and as displacement continues to rise, UNHCR concentrates on delivering protection, assistance and solutions for refugees, asylum-seekers, and internally displaced and stateless people – in more than 130 countries around the world. Doing this well requires the right business model to be fit for purpose for the evolving global and local challenges, and crises, of today and tomorrow.

That is what this MOPAN assessment of UNHCR is about. The overall conclusion is that UNHCR has retained key strengths and has made progress in key areas since the last time MOPAN assessed the organisation, in 2017-18, including in areas that MOPAN highlighted for improvement (Box 1), but there is also room for further improvement.

Box 1. UNHCR has made progress on areas MOPAN previously identified for improvement

MOPAN's 2017-18 assessment of UNHCR highlighted four major areas for improvement. Good progress has been made in all areas, which now needs to be consolidated. The areas are:

- 1.** UNHCR's strategic architecture and associated corporate results lack complete clarity – this assessment concludes that UNHCR has addressed weaknesses and ambiguities in its strategy and has identified eight areas for accelerated and targeted action (“focus areas”).
- 2.** UNHCR has an operationally short-term, rather than medium-term, approach and mindset – this assessment concludes that a multi-year strategic and results-based planning framework is in place in theory but is not yet reflected in how UNHCR works.
- 3.** UNHCR can improve its performance and knowledge management systems – this assessment concludes that UNHCR has improved its results reporting, but there are remaining challenges to further improve the quality of data and ensure their use in internal planning and external reporting.
- 4.** UNHCR has scope to improve its operational co-ordination with United Nations (UN) partners at field level – this assessment concludes that UNHCR is an active and engaged member of inter-agency response co-ordination in internal displacement settings but could do better in climate and disaster situations.

This brief provides an overview of the key findings from the assessment, focusing on areas of strength and outlining issues that UNHCR will still need to address to ensure it remains fit for the future to protect and support forcibly displaced and stateless people in the challenging and complex political and humanitarian contexts in which it operates.

UNHCR'S KEY STRENGTHS

UNHCR's mandate is strong, and its commitment to and focus on humanitarian principles and international refugee law run through its strategic priorities and operations

UNHCR's mandate is strong and unique and well reflected in its strategic directions and its operational priorities. It has helped the organisation maintain focus in times of a turbulent external operational environment and demanding internal organisational reforms. In line with this mandate, UNHCR retains a strong commitment to and focus on humanitarian principles and international refugee law. We found that UNHCR has a good understanding of its comparative advantages and complementarities to the mandates of key partners. The challenge is to consistently turn the strategy into results on the ground and report robustly on how it does so.

UNHCR is already seeing clear benefits of its comprehensive reform process

The previous MOPAN assessment noted a need for greater organisational cohesion and a more agile operating model. At that time, UNHCR had already begun a root-to-branch change process – a process that is not yet complete but is already bearing fruit. Improvements to highlight include:

- A clearer organisational structure, appropriately focused on decentralising decision-making authority to allow flexibility and agility at operational level.
- Clearer, consolidated and more streamlined policies, more easily accessible to staff and external stakeholders.
- Better data collection and reporting through the new COMPASS global results and planning framework, which offers better potential for multi-year results-based management – although further work will be needed to adjust indicators, strengthen results monitoring and socialise staff to use the COMPASS system to its full potential.
- A stronger infrastructure for preventing sexual exploitation and abuse and innovative solutions for victim support in relation to sexual harassment, both of which are shaped by active learning.
- Much-strengthened risk management, following a rigorous and benchmarked reform schedule which has already led to significant improvements and provides a clear direction of travel for the coming period.

UNHCR demonstrates a clear leadership role in refugee situations and is an active and engaged member in inter-agency response co-ordination in internal displacement settings

UNHCR is integrated into and supportive of humanitarian system-wide approaches. In refugee situations, it plays a clear leadership role, in line with its mandate. It leads the Refugee Coordination Model (RCM), and in this role establishes sectoral co-ordination mechanisms, leads the refugee protection work group, ensures participation of refugees and host communities, and helps build capacity of other organisations, while the UNHCR representative maintains a direct line to government. Decentralisation has helped UNHCR work closely with and through country systems and actors. This is becoming increasingly common not just at national but also at local level.

The clarity and predictability of UNHCR's contribution to responses to internal displacement and mixed displacement situations through the Inter-Agency Standing Committee cluster mechanisms have been strengthened since the last MOPAN assessment. This is particularly the case in conflict-related displacement settings. UNHCR's contribution in climate-related and disaster-induced emergencies is more uneven. UNHCR has clarified its policy on the role it will play in situations of disasters, but in practice, the level and predictability of its contributions in such emergencies remain mixed.

UNHCR has an impressive emergency response mechanism which at its best leads to very rapid surge and timely scale-up in response to crises

UNHCR is a strong responder to crises and can be quick to scale up when needed, although this speed varies from crisis to crisis, as UNHCR's own Level 3 emergency evaluations confirm. UNHCR's annual budget includes a provision for operational reserves, and recent changes to the rules around the utilisation of these reserves for sudden onset and emerging crisis situations have strengthened UNHCR's agility when mobilising resources to address sudden emergencies. UNHCR's 2023 Policy on Emergency Preparedness and Response provides a comprehensive and action-oriented overarching framework, and its operations are generally proactive in their advance preparations, including with situational risk analysis and monitoring and the prepositioning of stockpiles, in accordance with the policy.

In Moldova and Uganda, the two countries visited by the MOPAN assessment team, UNHCR's surge responses were impressive, as was its response to the humanitarian crisis triggered by the Taliban's take-over of power in Afghanistan. In some other cases, particularly where UNHCR is less well established on the ground or if the causes of displacement are natural disasters rather than conflict, we noted that UNHCR's response was less timely.

UNHCR is strong on global advocacy, in line with its mandate and in pursuit of globally agreed agendas and goals

In a world in which the movement of refugees, asylum seekers and irregular migrants is increasingly seen as part of a single and largely unwanted phenomenon, UNHCR continues to play an important and constructive role in the global discourse, in developing knowledge products and conducting advocacy on behalf of forcibly displaced and stateless people. UNHCR has considerable convening power, and its ability to amplify the voice of people of concern, as well as its legal and technical expertise in relation to its mandate, are well respected. As the guardian of the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol, UNHCR leads efforts to further the agenda of the Global Compact on Refugees and convenes the Global Refugee Forum, both of which are strong achievements in creating clear international frameworks on solidarity and burden-sharing, and refugee inclusion in whole-of-society approaches to finding solutions to refugee situations.

*February 2023,
Panama: 24,634
people crossed
the Darien Jungle
in January 2023,
risking their lives
in the journey
northwards in
search of protection
and safety. The
UNHCR priority
is to meet the
humanitarian needs
of people in transit
through the Darien
and provide help
and legal support
for people who then
seek asylum.*

Photo: © UNHCR/
Melissa Pinel



AREAS FOR FURTHER IMPROVEMENT

In a tightly earmarked funding environment, a growing key challenge to UNHCR is how to ensure resources are allocated according to need

The humanitarian funding environment is shifting, with a notable decline in the quality of funding – a trend that seems likely to continue, given the current geopolitical environment. While UNHCR’s budget is growing this growth is largely coming in the form of earmarked funds. In proportional terms, UNHCR’s unrestricted, core funding is at an all-time low, and strictly earmarked funding is at a high.

Most of UNHCR’s funding is geographically earmarked, which limits the organisation’s ability to align resource allocations with needs and with UNHCR’s strategic priorities. In a prominent recent example, the Ukraine displacement crisis triggered large donor earmarks towards Ukrainian refugees and internally displaced people. However, these large funding flows to UNHCR Ukraine were not all additional funds – some came at the expense of other UNHCR operations. As a result, in 2022, the Ukraine response (including for neighbouring countries) was 88% funded, but the Rohingya crisis in Bangladesh, for example, was only 51% funded.

UNHCR’s own analysis shows that the global distribution of funding that results from widespread earmarking is a poor match to the global distribution of needs. This suggests a need for further dialogue between UNHCR and its funders on how to improve the allocative efficiency of its funding.

But the assessment team also noted that it is currently difficult to assess to what extent UNHCR applies needs-based criteria for its core (unrestricted/flexible) funding allocations, and some funding allocations appear to have been based on other criteria. It would therefore be helpful for UNHCR to provide more detail in its reporting on how it allocates its core funding and to avoid spending core funding on operations that are relatively well funded compared to needs.

UNHCR needs to become a less demanding and more reasonable funding partner

The previous MOPAN assessment was critical of UNHCR’s partnership approach. Since then, UNHCR has embedded sensible principles of partnership in its policies and simplified and digitalised its partnership management system (PROMS), which is being rolled out. Through PROMS, UNHCR aims to create more tailor-made partnership agreements where capacity building and control measures can be adjusted based on the partner’s needs and gaps and the particular contextual risks faced by the operation. In practice, however, UNHCR continues in many cases to be an overly demanding partner, working according to a set of rigid reporting requirements that cannot be adapted according to the level of funding involved, the quality of the partnership or the strength of the implementing partners’ own monitoring and control systems. This results in onerous and unnecessary reporting burdens for many partners and in reports that are not fully utilised by UNHCR itself.

UNHCR has signed up to the Grand Bargain commitment on quality funding, but this is not yet reflected in practice. UNHCR receives relatively little multi-year funding from its own donors and passes little of what it does receive on to its implementing partners. The predictability of partnerships is also an issue, with implementing partners across countries facing vastly different timelines and requirements for otherwise comparable interventions. Some partners felt more like they were treated as contractors: having very short time frames for partnership agreement proposals, little opportunity for input into project design, heavily monitored projects with monthly reporting at output level, and short and frequently renegotiated funding envelopes.

UNHCR’s reform process aims to enable and instil a longer-term mindset into the organisation’s work, but this is not yet operationalised

Multi-year planning at country and regional levels has been introduced with the new reporting and results-based management system COMPASS. All country offices are scheduled to have multi-year strategies in place as of the

end of 2023. However, in practice, and as budgeting and funding are not yet multi-year, there has not yet been a transformation to a multi-year mindset. In most cases, UNHCR's ways of working, including with funded partners, continue to be on a shorter-term basis.

UNHCR has made significant efforts to develop a humanitarian-development-peace nexus way of working in protracted refugee situations and to support and encourage the inclusion of refugees in national development plans. However, dependencies and parallel systems remain a challenge in protracted refugee situations. While creating separate refugee response structures with governments may be a fast and effective way of establishing an emergency response capacity, it can become a roadblock to the longer-term aims of including refugees in national services and supporting them to become economically active and self-sufficient. UNHCR has made considerable efforts to develop better co-ordination with development actors (both national and international), but that work is not yet visibly bearing fruit in terms of practical co-ordination and the “hand-over” of roles and responsibilities as and when more developmental approaches become appropriate. UNHCR is aware of the need for exit strategies that hand over responsibility to national governments and development actors, rather than taking on development roles itself, but has not yet found a systematic way of designing and following up on such strategies. In order not to be locked into unsustainable agreements and practices, nexus thinking needs to be in place from day one.

UNHCR's restructuring has rendered the organisation better equipped to work coherently across divisions and levels, but the role of the regional bureaux is not sufficiently clear

The seven newly created regional bureaux have functions including operational support, programme planning, resource management, internal control and risk management. The proximity of regional bureaux to field operations is intended to support efficiency gains, and they were indeed central during the COVID-19 pandemic to UNHCR's ability to “stay and deliver”. However, we found lingering confusion from country offices around delineation of responsibilities, oversight roles and reporting lines between regional bureaux and headquarters (HQ). As long as the role of the regional bureaux remains unsettled, there is a risk that some of their functions become an unnecessary added layer of bureaucracy, but also a risk that the regional bureaux develop into separate power bases adding potential for blurring or complicating communication lines and decision-making processes.



February 2023, Central African Republic: Assistant High Commissioner Raouf Mazou visits Bria to explore durable solutions for displaced people. As part of the return process, in collaboration with the other actors of the Bria Durable Solutions working group, in 2022 the UNHCR supported nearly 800 displaced people in the return neighbourhoods.

Photo: © UNHCR/
Fidélia Bohissou

UNHCR's internal oversight bodies have become more unambiguously independent, but external consultation and transparency can still be improved

UNHCR has adequate internal oversight, and steps have been taken to ensure the independence of oversight bodies. Key internal oversight positions of the Ombudsman, the Inspector-General, and the heads of the Evaluation Office and Ethics Office are explicit non-career positions. The oversight organs have only a modest budget allocation but are largely on top of their remits.

UNHCR has a different governance structure than other UN agencies, with the High Commissioner bound by the 1950 UNHCR Statute and a mandate “until the refugee problem is solved”. The UN General Assembly is the governing body of UNHCR, and the High Commissioner provides it with annual reports. UNHCR also has an Executive Committee (ExCom), which was established to provide advice to the High Commissioner and to approve the use of voluntary funds. ExCom is a consultative, not a governing, body. It has the authority to approve the UNHCR Programme Budget. While cognisant of the importance of respecting the mandate and the non-political character of the High Commissioner’s work, many external stakeholders, particularly among donors, noted that UNHCR could further strengthen its transparency and reporting practices and adopt a more consultative approach with ExCom. This would include informing and consulting in good time before major decisions are taken and looking into the possibility of systematically tabling the results of scrutiny reports and their management responses at ExCom Standing Committee meetings and would enable more interactive dialogue with member states. In return, ExCom members could do more to use the existing scrutiny reports and avoid individual and overlapping scrutiny requests.

There has been only mixed progress on cross-cutting issues

Overall, in this assessment, evidence shows that UNHCR’s performance in delivering gender outcomes has improved significantly and is now satisfactory. There is now an Age, Gender and Diversity (AGD) policy, data gathering and reporting is disaggregated, there is a roll-out plan for the policy and there are more resources allocated to gender issues. However, evaluation evidence suggests that the quality and quantity of gender-disaggregated data is work in progress, and staff awareness of the new policy is low but improving.

On environment and climate change, there has been some improvement, but actual performance and results are still uneven. There have been considerable efforts by UNHCR to incorporate climate and environment as cross-cutting issues, but action in these areas still depends largely on individual staff interest. There is an opportunity for a step change in this area with the imminent release of UNHCR’s Strategic Plan on Climate Action 2024-2030.



January 2022, Niger: Refugees, internally displaced and host community join forces on market garden project. Niger has hosted refugees who fled the conflict in Mali since 2012. Today, nearly 60,000 Malian refugees live in Niger, including about 36,000 in the Tillabéri region.

Photo: © UNHCR/
Colin Delfosse

CONCLUSION

If UNHCR is to live up to its potential and deliver on its mandate to provide protection, response and solutions in today's complex geopolitical environment, it must have the right business model. The assessment concludes that UNHCR has made good progress towards the right strategic direction, systems and processes, and programmatic approaches to deliver effective results. Moving forward, there are also a range of areas for performance improvement to shore up UNHCR's foundations, and MOPAN will assess progress against these areas in the next assessment (Box 2).

Box 2. UNHCR's main strengths and areas for improvement

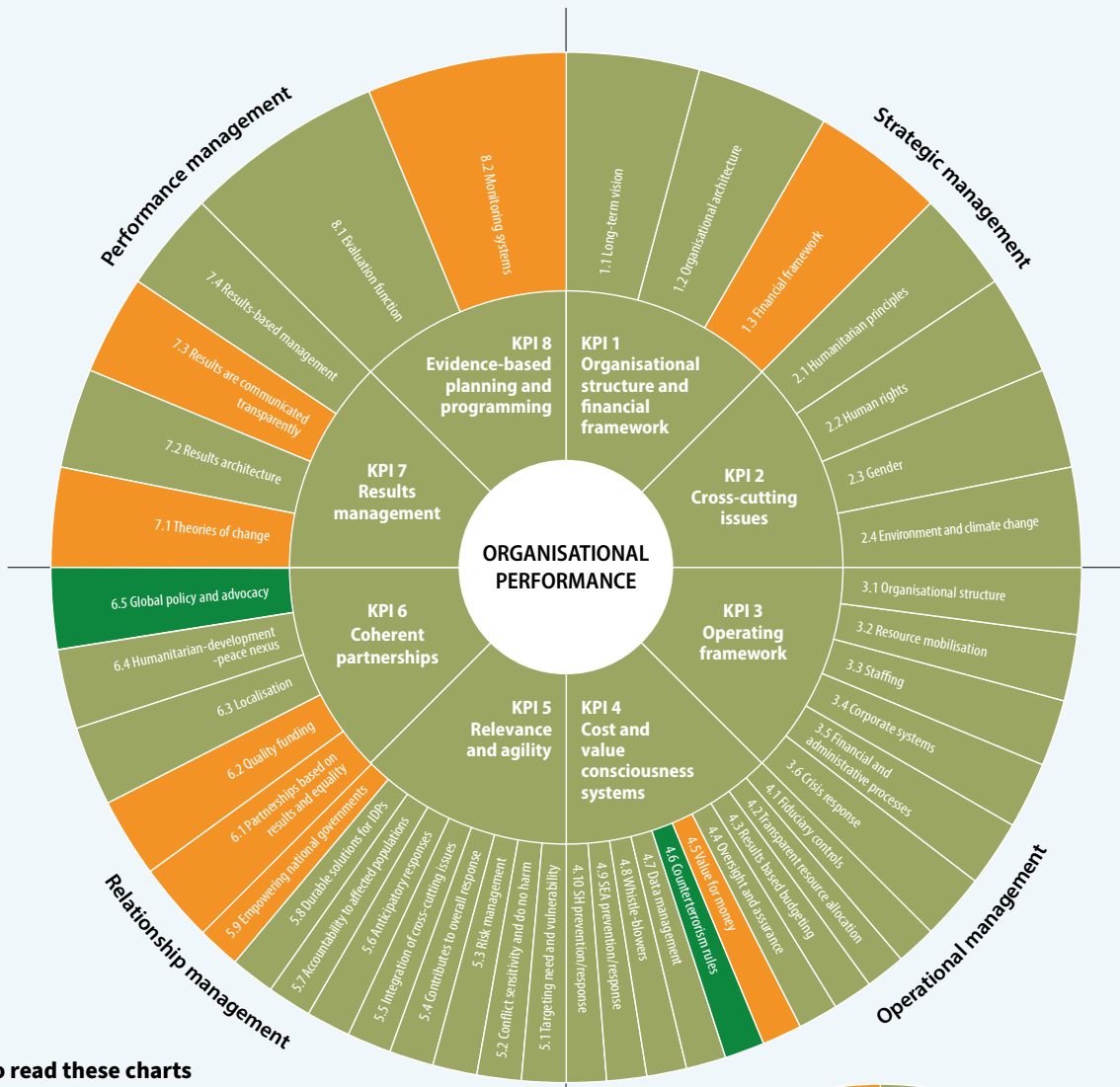
Strengths

- The mandate of UNHCR is strong, and its commitment to and focus on humanitarian principles and international refugee law run through its strategic priorities and operations.
- UNHCR plays a strong global advocacy role, in line with its mandate and in pursuit of globally agreed agendas and goals.
- UNHCR's leadership in furthering the agenda of the Global Compact on Refugees and its convening role for the Global Refugee Forum, are strong achievements in creating clear international frameworks on solidarity and burden-sharing.
- In refugee situations, UNHCR plays a leadership role in the international response in accordance with its mandate, and in the inter-agency humanitarian response mechanisms to other displacement situations, UNHCR plays a collaborative and positive role.
- An impressive emergency response mechanism leads at its best to very rapid surge and timely scale-up in response to crises.
- Decentralisation and comprehensive organisational reform are already bearing fruit and are supporting UNHCR's strategic directions and setting it on a path towards a multi-year outlook, even if further work is needed to make the most out of new processes and management tools.

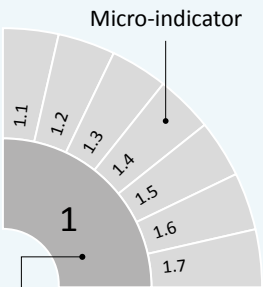
Areas for Improvement

- Delivering the right cultural changes and incentives to shift towards a multi-year mindset and ways of working.
- Further strengthening the use of evidence in planning and programming, reinforcing the foundations laid by its new COMPASS reporting and results-based management and budgeting framework.
- Further clarifying and delivering on UNHCR's role in climate emergencies and disasters and delivering on climate and environmental goals more systematically.
- Continuing to consolidate the reform programme and clarifying and socialising the role of the regional bureaux.
- Rethinking refugee responses from a longer-term perspective, so that to the extent possible refugee emergencies are approached from day one in a manner that reduces the risk of UNHCR becoming "stuck" as the long-term principal service provider in protracted refugee situations.
- Continuing reforms towards becoming a less demanding and more reasonable partner in funded relationships.
- Improving consultation with the Executive Committee and improving "no surprises" reporting to funders.

UNHCR'S PERFORMANCE RATING SUMMARY

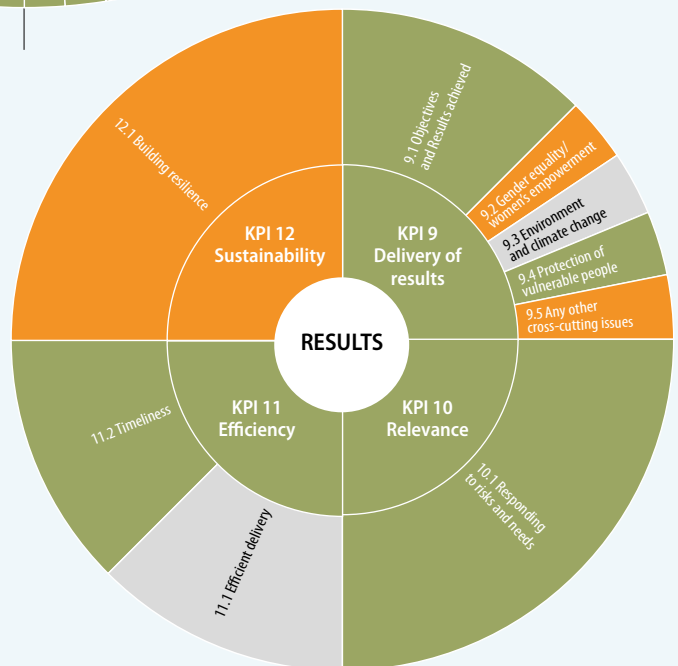


How to read these charts



Key Performance Indicator

- Highly satisfactory** (3.51-4.00)
- Satisfactory** (2.51-3.50)
- Unsatisfactory** (1.51-2.50)
- Highly unsatisfactory** (0-1.50)
- No evidence / Not applicable**



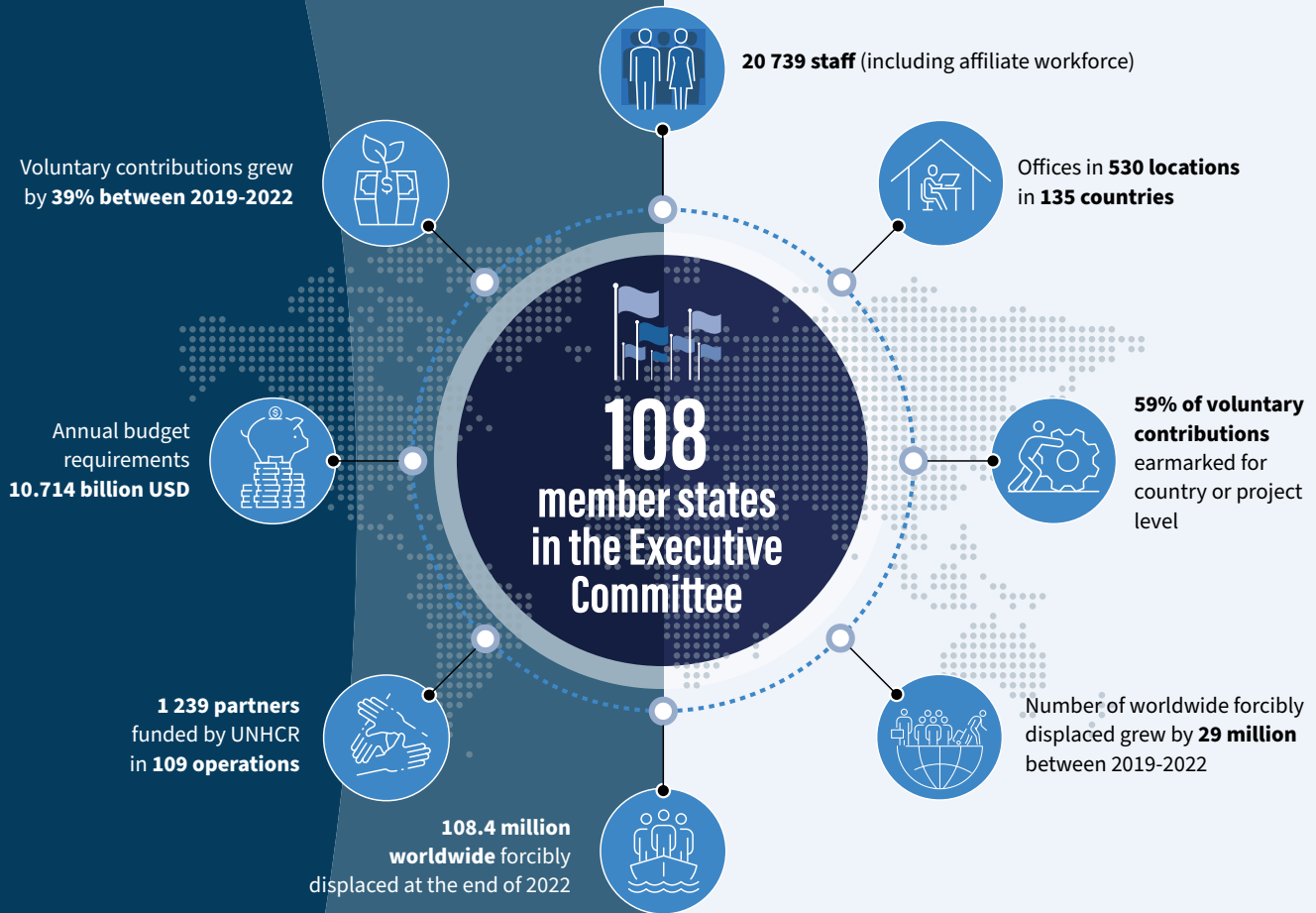
Performance in figures UNHCR

INSTITUTIONAL LEADS

The Netherlands, Switzerland, the United Kingdom

Overview

UNHCR was established in 1950 as the UN’s refugee agency, to provide assistance to the millions of refugees displaced during and in the aftermath of World War II. Together with the UNHCR Statute, the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol represent the legal cornerstone for UNHCR’s work and the “most comprehensive codification of the rights of refugees at the international level”.



Sources: UNHCR Global Report 2022 and UNHCR Global Trends Report 2023.

MOPAN member contributions to UNHCR in 2022

Member	Contributions USD
United States	2,195,608,503
Germany	535,769,917
Japan	167,708,064
Sweden	145,652,735
Norway	118,176,368
Netherlands	110,001,407
Denmark	106,949,997
United Kingdom	99,337,588
France	99,265,458
Italy	97,440,630
Canada	96,277,146

Member	Contributions USD
Switzerland	58,464,442
Australia	40,731,300
Spain	31,667,852
Ireland	28,694,142
Republic of Korea	28,232,363
Finland	27,497,582
Belgium	22,045,350
Qatar	21,501,968
Luxembourg	13,401,941
New Zealand	6,142,051
Türkiye	300,000

Source: Global Report 2022 | Global Focus (unhcr.org)

ABOUT UNHCR

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) was established in 1950 as the UN’s refugee agency, to provide assistance to the millions of refugees displaced during and in the aftermath of World War II. Together with the UNHCR Statute, the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol represent the legal cornerstone for UNHCR’s work and the “most comprehensive codification of the rights of refugees at the international level”. In addition to defining who is a refugee, the 1951 Convention sets out the rights to which refugees are entitled and enshrines fundamental principles of refugee protection including the strict prohibition of refoulement, which is widely recognised as a norm of customary international law:

No Contracting State shall expel or return (‘refouler’) a refugee in any manner whatsoever to the frontiers of territories where his life or freedom would be threatened on account of his race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion.

1951 Refugee Convention (UNHCR,1951)

Regional refugee law instruments, such as the 1969 OAU Convention governing Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa, the 1984 Cartagena Declaration on Refugees and the laws forming part of the Common European Asylum System, build upon the 1951 Convention and together constitute the global refugee legal framework.

UNHCR is the world’s leading refugee agency, with offices in 135 countries and 20 739 staff in 2023. Since its inception in 1950, UNHCR has operated in an unprecedented external context, with 108.4 million people worldwide forcibly displaced in 2022. Since the last MOPAN assessment, in 2017-18, the COVID-19 pandemic has created a global health emergency, conflicts have led to multiple large-scale displacement emergencies, while protracted refugee situations have continued with few solutions in sight, and climate impacts are aggravating multiple causes of forced displacement. The war in Ukraine, beginning in February 2022, has led to the world’s largest refugee crisis, with over 6 million Ukrainians becoming refugees. Within this difficult operating environment, UNHCR has established key multi-stakeholder initiatives with partners, notably the Global Compact for Refugees and others including the Window for Host Communities and Refugees as part of the World Bank’s IDA19. UNHCR’s annual budget has also evolved to reflect the increased number of people falling under its protection mandate, growing by 15.9% in 2022 compared to 2021.



November 2023, Ecuador: Ana Duchi, a 7th-grade teacher at Juan Montalvo School has received UNHCR training as part of *Respiramos Inclusión* (We breathe Inclusion), a methodology designed and implemented by UNHCR in Ecuador since 2013 to prevent discrimination and xenophobia in the education system.

Photo: © UNHCR/
Jeffrey Guillemard

ABOUT THIS ASSESSMENT

This is the fourth MOPAN assessment of UNHCR. The previous assessment was conducted in 2017-18. The Netherlands, Switzerland and the United Kingdom championed the assessment on behalf of the MOPAN network. This assessment covers the period from January 2018 to August 2023 and assesses whether UNHCR is fit for purpose in a rapidly evolving global context. The assessment draws on multiple lines of evidence (documentary, survey and interviews) from sources within and outside the organisation to validate and triangulate findings across 12 key performance indicators, which are in turn broken down into more than 220 individual indicators.

Methodology applied in this assessment

MOPAN's 2022 study on *Rethinking Effective Humanitarian Organisations* (MOPAN, 2022) concluded that MOPAN needed to adapt its framework for assessing organisations working in crises to better reflect the nature of humanitarian operations – including the policy environment – and the practical requirements of working in crisis situations. MOPAN then worked under the guidance of a Humanitarian Advisory Group – including MOPAN members, multilateral organisations, policy leaders and think tanks – to develop an adapted framework for multilateral organisations primarily working in crisis contexts. That framework was applied for this assessment. Key adaptations include:

- new crisis-specific areas, such as anticipatory action, humanitarian principles, the humanitarian-development-peace nexus, localisation and accountability to affected populations;
- increased focus on other critical areas such as procurement and staff safety and security;
- applying a crisis-specific lens to areas such as gender and preventing sexual exploitation and abuse and sexual harassment.

The adapted framework aligns to the five MOPAN 3.1 performance areas: strategic, operational, relationship, performance management and results. However, the micro-indicators (Mis) were adapted to ensure that they reflect the due diligence and learning needs of MOPAN members and multilateral organisations. Accordingly, the elements to guide the rating against the MOPAN rating scale were also adapted to fit these Mis.

ABOUT MOPAN

MOPAN is a network of 22 members¹ who assess multilateral organisations, shape performance standards, and champion learning and insights to strengthen development and humanitarian results and promote accountability. Capitalising on the Network's unique cross-multilateral system perspective and expertise, MOPAN members work together to deliver relevant, impartial, high-quality and timely performance information as a public good through an inclusive and transparent approach. MOPAN's performance information mitigates risks, informs decision-making and supports change, helping to increase knowledge and trust among all stakeholders and ultimately to achieve a stronger and better-performing multilateral system.



1. Australia, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Korea, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Norway, Qatar, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, United Kingdom, United States. *Türkiye and New Zealand are observers. MOPAN also collaborates closely with the European Union



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