

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)

Committee Overview

The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) is the global organization included into the system of the UN that aims to save lives, protect rights, and build a better and more sustainable future for people who were forced to flee their home due to conflict or persecution¹. The UNHCR was established in 1950 by the United Nations General Assembly to help millions of Europeans who fled from their homes as a consequence of World War II. As the refugee crisis continued throughout 20th century, United Nations General Assembly (GA) passed a resolution making the body permanent².

While the UNHCR takes into account the movement of migrants, it is important to distinguish it from the IOM (International Organization for Migration)³ and the UNRWA (United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East)⁴. At the end of 2021, 1 out of 88 people worldwide, or 89.3 million individuals, had been forcibly displaced as a result of persecution, conflict, violence, human rights violations or events seriously disturbing public order⁵. The number doubled since 2012, becoming over 1% of the world's population⁶. It includes 27.1 million refugees, 53.2 million Internally Displaced People (IDPs), 4.6 million asylum-seekers, and 5.1 million refugees returned. In addition, UNHCR is mandated to protect and assist those who are stateless, most of whom are not forcibly displaced⁷.

Governance, Mandate, Membership and Structure.

The primary source of UNHCR's mandate is the Statute of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, adopted by the General Assembly (GA) of the United Nations in 1950 with passing of *Resolution 428 (V)*.⁸ The Statute is complemented by subsequent GA Resolutions, the *1951 Refugee Convention* and its *1967 Protocol*, and regional refugee instruments.

UNHCR reports to the UN General Assembly and the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC).⁹ In 2003, the UNGA's mandate was extended "until the refugee problem is solved." The High Commissioner presents UNHCR's biennial programs and budget, which are approved by the UNHCR Executive Committee (ExCom).¹⁰ ExCom is the governing body responsible for providing guidance and making decisions on matters related to the agency's operations and policies. The Inspector General's Office (IGO) serves as a vital component of UNHCR's independent

¹ United Nations Higher Commissioner for Refugees, *Who We Are*

² United Nations, General Assembly. Implementing actions proposed by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees to strengthen the capacity of his Office to carry out its mandate (A/RES/58/153). 2003

³ International Organization for Migration, *Who We Are*

⁴ The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees, *Who We Are*

⁵ United Nations Higher Commissioner for Refugees. *Global Trends*. 2022

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ UNHCR, *Governance and Oversight*

⁹ *Governance and Organization | How the UNHCR is run and structured*. 2016.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

oversight system. Aligned with UNHCR's *Policy on Independent Oversight*, this system aims to provide unbiased assurance to the executive management and governance bodies of UNHCR regarding adherence to policies and procedures.¹¹

UNHCR collaborates with a large number of partners ranging, including Member States, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), the private sector, and civil society organizations (CSOs). The UNHCR works with a variety of important international organizations, including the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the World Food Programme (WFP), the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF), the World Health Organization (WHO), the UN Development Programme (UNDP), the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) and the Joint UN Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS).

UNHCR is present in 137 countries; 90% of its workers are engaged in field operations, while 10% are based at Geneva Headquarters or in Global Services Centers in Budapest, Copenhagen, and Amman.¹² Only 3% of UNHCR's budget comes from the UN - the remaining 97% comes from voluntary contributions from governments, corporations, and individual donors.

Topic: Addressing the Integration of Refugees and IDPs in Host Communities

Introduction

The factors driving migration and displacement include conflict, the consequences of environmental degradation and climate change, poverty, limited employment opportunities, and spatial inequalities. At the end of 2022 as a result of persecution, human rights violations, conflict, and other events that disturb public order, 108.4 million people worldwide were forcibly displaced, which means that 1 in 74 people worldwide had left their homes involuntarily;¹³ 35.3 million were refugees and 62.5 million people were IDPs.¹⁴ IDPs account for 58% of all forcibly displaced people.¹⁵ According to the *Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre*, there were a reported 32.6 million instances of internal displacement caused by disasters within the year.¹⁶ Primary responsibility for protecting IDPs and all persons within their own country rests with the national authorities of the country. This makes IDPs more vulnerable, since Member States' sovereignty prevents UNHCR from acting on behalf of IDPs without the host country's permission.

Countries neighboring the nations of origin accommodated approximately 70% of refugees and individuals requiring international protection; 76% of refugees and those who are in need of international protection are hosted in low-and middle-income countries.¹⁷ An acceptable quality of life encompasses sufficient access to food, water, housing, healthcare, sanitation facilities, and primary education.

¹¹ UNHCR, Governance and Oversight

¹² UNHCR, Where We Work

¹³ Office of the United Nations Higher Commissioner for Refugees. Global Trends: Forced Displacement. 2022.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Office of the United Nations Higher Commissioner for Refugees. Data and Statistics Global Trends 2023.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

The *1951 Refugee Convention* establishes the fundamental minimum criteria for the treatment of refugees, encompassing their entitlement to seek housing, employment, and education on the same terms as other non-citizens; the non-discrimination principle is designed to provide refugees with the opportunity to live a respectable and self-reliant existence. In 2018, the United Nations General Assembly affirmed the *Global Compact on Refugees*, a framework for various stakeholders to alleviate the burdens on host countries, ensuring they receive the necessary support while enabling refugees to lead productive lives. UNHCR leads the *Global Protection Cluster (GPC)*, which focuses on strengthening protection measures, providing assistance, and advocating for the rights and well-being of vulnerable individuals, including refugees and IDPs. In its efforts with IDPs, the UNHCR leverages its extensive expertise in shelter, as well as the management of camps and sites, in a systematic manner.

Climate-resilient and affordable housing

All displaced persons have a fundamental right to pursue sustainable housing, which ensures access to safe, adequate, and affordable shelter. 60% of migrants and 80% of refugees and IDPs are drawn to cities looking for safety, shelter, improved access to essential services, and better livelihood prospects.¹⁸ A significant percentage of refugees and internally displaced individuals, approximately 70% and 80% respectively, come from countries situated in climate-affected regions. Sustainable housing for refugees aims to provide durable and resilient living conditions that meet their basic needs. Climate-resilient housing minimizes the likelihood of further displacement.

Forcibly displaced people often settle in places where they struggle to adapt to the growing challenges of an increasingly hostile environment, exacerbated by climate change impacts. Rising sea levels, extreme weather events, and resource scarcity further compound the difficulties faced by displaced populations. Safe, secure, and affordable housing is a fundamental human right. It determines overall health and well-being, provides a base from which forcibly displaced people can seek employment, establish family or new connections, and receive appropriate care and social protection.

The Paris Agreement, adopted in 2015 at the *United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC)* conference, acknowledges the need to strengthen the global response to the adverse effects of climate change, including the potential impacts on communities and vulnerable groups. UNHCR's *Strategic Framework for Climate Action* has established guidelines for refugee shelter and settlement planning, which take into account environmental considerations and promote sustainable practices. These guidelines aim to ensure that shelters are durable, safe, and designed to withstand climate-related challenges.

UNHCR's *Initiative on Internal Displacement 2020-2021* aims to strengthen delivery in internal displacement situations in line with its coordination responsibilities related to shelter and camp management. Furthermore, the guidelines delineate the responsibilities of refugees towards their host countries. The United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat) and UNHCR introduced a *Settlement Profiling Tool* aimed at assisting in the identification of infrastructure

¹⁸ UN-Habitat. *Urban Migration*. 2022.

needs and priorities for displaced populations. It aims to empower stakeholders in prioritizing investment opportunities and making well-informed decisions regarding refugee and host communities.

Access to quality education for refugee

Schools are the places of safety and learning, providing a path towards normalcy for individuals who have been uprooted from their homes due to instability. Among the 20.7 million refugees under UNHCR's care, 7.9 million are school-age refugee children. A significant number of children are deprived of the safety and opportunities that schools offer, with nearly half of all refugee children (48%) not attending school.¹⁹

These out-of-school children are at a higher risk of being forced into armed groups, subjected to child labor, exposed to sexual exploitation, and forced into child marriages. Education can promote social integration by bringing children from diverse backgrounds together in a learning environment. It fosters understanding, tolerance, and respect for cultural differences.

The Education 2030 Incheon Declaration and Framework for Action highlights the significance of education as an essential human right and a catalyst for fostering sustainable development. In 2010, the Global Protection Cluster published the *Handbook for the Protection of Internally Displaced Persons* that highlights the lack of access to high-quality education for refugees, including obstacles such as the lack of adequate educational facilities, discrimination, and lack of safe learning environments. With the help of the *Education Cluster*, which is co-led by United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), UNHCR aims to reintegrate forcibly displaced peoples into the formal education system through psychological support, providing adequate facilities and subsidiary classes. In 2019, UNHCR published "*Refugee Education 2030: A Strategy for Refugee Inclusion*" that aims to achieve high-quality education for refugees within national education systems.

Access to employment

Refugees face multiple barriers in accessing decent work due to factors such as high unemployment rates, informal economies, administrative hurdles, language barriers, and exorbitant recruitment fees. They may be limited to low-skilled or unskilled job opportunities or compelled to engage in informal economy activities. Worldwide, 62% of refugees reside in countries where their right to work is constrained, encompassing limitations on both self-employment and wage employment. In addition, the poverty rate for refugees is typically 25 to 40% higher than that of the national population.²⁰

Employment is crucial for self-reliance, rebuilding lives, integrating into host communities, and contributing to the economy for displaced individuals. Access to labor market reduces the burden on humanitarian aid and assistance, as self-sufficient refugees can gradually integrate into society and become contributors to the community. Additionally, employment access can aid in social cohesion, fostering positive interactions between displaced populations and host communities. The

¹⁹ Office of the United Nations Higher Commissioner for Refugees. Education Thematic Brief 2023.

²⁰ Office of the United Nations Higher Commissioner for Refugees. Global Compact on Refugees Indicator Report. 2021

International Labour Organization (ILO) and UNHCR have collaboratively created a *Joint Action Plan (JAP) 2023 to 2025*, that aims to enhance access to the labor market, promote decent work conditions, and provide sufficient social protection for forcibly displaced individuals. This initiative is part of broader efforts to safeguard their rights and extend support to the host communities.

UNHCR's *Refugee Integration: Capacity and Evaluation Project* aims to enhance displaced individuals' integration through collaboration with governments and stakeholders, focusing on better employment opportunities for refugees to ensure a more effective integration process. UNHCR's *Refugee Livelihoods and Economic Inclusion* initiatives are designed to support and empower refugees by providing them with decent work opportunities and promoting economic self-reliance through skill training and capacity building.

Questions to consider:

1. Who is an IDP? Who is a refugee? What is the difference between refugees and IDPs?
2. Why is it important to enable effective integration of IDPs and refugees in the host communities?
3. What are the key challenges faced by displaced persons and refugees in integrating into host communities?
4. How does climate change contribute to forced displacement?
5. Why it is important for refugees and IDPs to access education and employment?

Helpful links:

1. <https://www.unhcr.org/>
2. <https://reporting.unhcr.org/>
3. <https://www.unhcr.org/about-unhcr/who-we-are/1951-refugee-convention>
4. <https://unfccc.int/process-and-meetings/the-paris-agreement>
5. <https://www.unhcr.org/about-unhcr/who-we-are/global-compact-refugees>
6. <https://www.globalprotectioncluster.org/>
7. <https://www.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/legacy-pdf/604a26d84.pdf>

Regional Organizations:

African Union-
<https://www.au.int/>

Arab League-
<http://www.arableagueonline.org/>

Association of South East Asian Nations-
<http://asean.org/>

Asian Cooperation Dialogue-
<http://www.acd-dialogue.org/>

European Union-

https://europa.eu/european-union/index_en

Economic Community of West African States-

<http://www.ecowas.int/>

Organization of American States-

<http://www.oas.org/en/>

Pacific Islands Forum-

<http://www.forumsec.org/>

Union of South American Nations-

<http://www.unasur.int/en>

United Nations Entities

International Peace and Security-

<http://www.un.org/en/sections/priorities/international-peace-and-security/>

Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs

<https://www.unocha.org/>