SUSTAINABLE PROGRAMMING

WHAT IS SUSTAINABLE PROGRAMMING AND WHY IS IT NEEDED?

Over the last decade, the world has witnessed a rising trend in the magnitude and complexity of forced displacement with the total number of displaced people increasing from less than 42 million in 2013 to a staggering 120 million by mid-2024, the majority of whom have been displaced for more than 5 years. Forced displacement due to persecution, conflict, violence, and human rights violations, is exacerbated by the impact of state fragility, poverty, and climate change. Against this backdrop, receiving States, host communities, donor countries and international humanitarian aid organizations are overstretched.

Sustainable programming is about maximizing self-reliance and minimizing dependency on humanitarian aid. It means expanding the human potential of forcibly displaced people and putting basic services such as education, health care, housing and water on a sustainable footing, thereby minimizing their dependence on short-term humanitarian funding and freeing up funds for protection and long-term solutions. It means collectively supporting refugee-hosting states so that they can bring refugees into their national systems and so that they can strengthen their institutions for asylum, civil registration, and protection.

Over the past 2 years, on average, a significant share of UNHCR's resources have been spent on provision of basic needs such as shelter, health, education, and WASH via relatively inefficient parallel systems. In contrast, during the same period, on average, only 2% of UNHCR's spending went towards helping refugees return to their home country, and only 4% on promoting their self-reliance. Given that donor funding has not and will not keep pace with the rising numbers of forcibly displaced people, we need to find a way to start reversing these proportions: to reduce scarce funding spent on short-term service provision and increase the share promoting social and economic integration and longer-term solutions, including sustainable voluntary returns, depending on context.

Sustainable programming is not new; rather, it reinforces the principles of the 2018 Global Compact on Refugees, to work with the whole-of-society to include and empower forcibly displaced people. The sustainable programming approach leverages the significant commitments and pledges announced at the recent Global Refugee Forum (GRF), without representing a disengagement for UNHCR. It is also aligned with our collective efforts on solutions to internal displacement and to end statelessness.

It is a dynamic approach, entailing identifying subsistence activities which, over time, may have become less impactful and require recalibration.

At the core, sustainable programming emphasizes community empowerment and human development, in partnership with host governments, development partners, civil society, private sector, and most importantly, the forcibly displaced themselves. Displaced communities have enormous potential – they can, together with host communities, contribute to economic growth and prosperity, including through tax revenues, skillsets, innovations, and cultural exchange. UNHCR will also foster a "whole of government" leadership of the refugee response in a manner that ensures line ministries and local governments are supported to play their mandated roles in service delivery, social protection, economic inclusion, and other key areas. UNHCR will also work to facilitate and catalyse development actors and private sector to provide sustainable services and employment opportunities to IDPs and refugees. This investment would generate social and economic growth as well as foster solutions, including enabling forcibly displaced people to be better positioned to return home when conditions are safe.

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WHAT WILL UNHCR DO DIFFERENTLY TO ACCELERATE SUSTAINABLE PROGRAMMING?

Ensure that sustainability, inclusion, and solutions are at the core from the start of emergency response, based on the following overall principles:

- Avoid setting up camps to the maximum extent possible.
- Build the protection response and provision of basic services around existing governmental services, including local line ministries and social protection systems.
- Advocate for adjusting and adapting post-emergency standards to be more in line with national standards.

In each country where UNHCR serves forcibly displaced people, define clear vision and plan for 2025-27 engaging all relevant stakeholders to advance inclusion, self-reliance, solutions, including through return and reintegration:

- Use reliable and robust internal and external data to advocate and catalyse stakeholder investments in refugee and host communities that can have a significant impact on refugee wellbeing and better protection dividends.
- Support government-led multi-stakeholder transition strategies.
- Systematically work to transition services to other actors who can provide them more sustainably. The duration of the transition period may significantly vary between operational contexts. Increase opportunities for targeting of assistance and “user-pays” principles in protracted and urban situations.
- Support strengthening of national and local protection institutions, enabling policies, and civil society capacities.
- Involve multilateral development banks and bilateral development actors in policy dialogue with host governments and monitoring of protection dividends from development investments. Clear indicators and measures of success will be used to track progress, achievement and results.
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- These country visions and plans will also continue to invest in localization efforts and capacity building of community-based, refugee, and IDP-led organizations, as well as support strengthening of national and local protection institutions, enabling policies, and civil society capacities.

Multistakeholder and “whole-of-government” approach:

- Map policy parameters and identify opportunities for government and development partners to fully embrace refugee inclusion and support to host communities. In this regard, fully utilize the Global Refugee Forum pledges and focus attention on responsibility sharing across the whole of society.
- In addition to engaging with traditional governmental counterparts (Ministry of Interior, Refugees Commission), more systematically engage with other entities (line ministries, planning/development ministries, ministry of finance, and local government/municipalities), and align with national/local development plans.
- Systematically engage with private sector to catalyze employment of forcibly displaced people, investments in refugee hosting communities, and joint advocacy & public engagement for the support of forcibly displaced people.
- Involve sister United Nations agencies and non-governmental organizations with development expertise in refugee programming, especially in their planning and programming with government.

Breaking legacy cycles of humanitarian programming:

- Identify subsistence activities that need to be recalibrated with the aim of maximizing the impact of scarce resources available. In some cases, this may require a longer transition period.

Generate efficiencies and optimize staffing structures and fund-raising strategies:

- Maximize efficiencies and rationalize operational footprints.
- Recognizing that each country context is different, align and adapt fundraising strategies and staffing architectures to best enable each country’s programmatic shift and pathway to self-reliance.

WHAT ARE THE RISKS?

Notwithstanding the opportunities and benefits that sustainable programming presents, it is important to underline that some stakeholders may see this shift as an attempt to transfer the burden to them. Furthermore, the nature of this shift would require a "whole-of-government" approach in host countries, seeking to avoid siloed refugee management. It is therefore essential that sustainable programming be a collective and inclusive process to ensure a more efficient use of limited humanitarian resources.

Given that sustainable programming requires other actors' cooperation and commitments, this will be a lengthy and non-linear process in some countries. UNHCR – and all stakeholders – will need to avoid the temptation to utilize 'quick fixes' and one-size-fits-all approaches.

WHAT ARE SOME CURRENT EXAMPLES AND MODELS FOR SUSTAINABLE PROGRAMMING?

The phrase "sustainable programming" may be new, but the approach that it describes is already at work, in countries such as the Republic of Congo, Kenya, Mauritania, and Brazil. Building on more than five years' experience since the Global Compact on Refugees was adopted, UNHCR can now pursue this approach in a more systematic way.

Protection

From the onset ensure the host government is equipped to identify those on its territory through protection sensitive systems and in line with international standards, e.g., management of reception, registration, civil registration and identity documentation, and refugee status determination, including data sharing agreements and registration and the development of cost-effective and sustainable asylum and refugee management systems with integrity. With regard to protection services and mechanisms (gender-based violence, child protection, civil registration and national identification, security and justice, social welfare) and protection mechanisms (oversight and participatory mechanisms), proactive work towards capacity sharing and a transition and handover of responsibilities to State and local civil society institutions, where feasible and sustainable, will be key.

Emergency response

Inclusion from the start remains paramount to avoiding the creation of parallel systems and subsistence programmes that foster dependency. Investments in emergency preparedness, early engagement with development actors, better sharing resources and coordinating inter-agency efforts will help with a smoother transition to a post-emergency programme. A more predictable approach to respond to emergencies would also facilitate the expansion/contraction of UNHCR's operational footprint (staffing and office structures) post-emergencies. Source: UNHCR Policy on Emergency Preparedness and Response.

Mauritania

Today almost 50% of programme resources are allocated to subsistence programming. The intention is to shift part of these resources towards solutions, given the Government of Mauritania's continued openness and generosity towards refugees and ongoing efforts to include them in national systems. This creates opportunities to actively engage in self-reliance and inclusion from the start, particularly for those people who have not expressed interest to return in the immediate to medium-term. The EU is starting a migration partnership with Mauritania which includes refugee management. Today almost 50% of programme resources are allocated to subsistence programming. The intention is to shift part of these resources towards solutions. **Source:** UNHCR.

Republic of the Congo

The middle-income country status of Republic of the Congo, the long-term stay of refugees there, their access to national services and possibilities for local integration had the operation engaging early on with various actors through a whole-of-society approach to ensure effective and long-term solutions for self-reliance. UNHCR has focused on self-reliance, inclusion and protection with limited assistance and interventions in technical sectors. As an example, between 2021 and 2023, refugee populations, asylum seekers and the host community benefitted from USD 24 million, thanks to the collaboration and advocacy carried out by UNHCR with a variety of actors at institutional and technical levels. The level of this non-transactional support allowed for an effective response to refugee needs when the budget of the operation had decreased by 54% during the same period. **Source:** UNHCR.

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Brazil

In Brazil, hosting refugees had a net zero fiscal impact in 2018, as Venezuelan refugees' tax contributions matched hosting expenses, around $100 million. Over time, as more Venezuelans gain employment, their tax contributions are expected to rise, reducing the relative fiscal burden. **Source:** Integration of Venezuelan Refugees and Migrants in Brazil, World Bank-UNHCR.

Costa Rica

In Costa Rica, Nicaraguan refugees and migrants contributed to a 6.5% increase in the country's GDP from 2017 to 2021. The net fiscal impact of hosting displaced people was positive – that is, the contributions of migrants and refugees via social security payments and taxes were greater than the cost of providing them services such as health, education, social transfers, housing, and pensions. **Source:** Characteristics and Economic Impact of Migrants and Refugees in Costa Rica, International Monetary Fund.

Ukraine

At the onset of the war in February 2022, UNHCR began providing transitional cash assistance to IDPs for a period of three months. This period allows new IDPs to regularize their displacement status and register for the Government's IDP allowance entitlement. In other words, UNHCR's time-bound cash assistance programme for IDPs in Ukraine bridges the gap between emergency aid and longer-term inclusion in the Government's social protection system, empowering IDPs and promoting their well-being in the initial 3 months of the displacement. **Source:** UNHCR.

Kenya

In Kenya, hosting refugees increased Turkana County's Gross Regional Product by 3.4%, creating jobs and improving access to essential services like healthcare and education. Giving refugees the right to work and freedom of movement led to a 6% increase in the host economy's per capita income. **Source**: Yes-in-my-backyard report, World Bank-UNHCR.

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