UNHCR
The UN Refugee Agency

PUTTING DATA TO WORK

Using Evidence in Advocacy, Policy and Programmes to Support Sustainable Responses in Forced Displacement Settings

Volume 3 | July 2025

Sustainable Responses Hinge on Socioeconomic Data and Evidence

Forced displacement is a global crisis that calls for enhanced cooperation across humanitarian, development and peace actors. Around the world, millions have been forced from their homes – not by choice, but by war, persecution and famine; and more than a million children born as refugees face uncertain futures.

The Global Compact on Refugees (GCR) lays out a framework for shared responsibility. It calls for policies that respect rights, expand access to livelihoods, and support refugees and the communities that host them. A shift towards more sustainable responses – rooted in self-reliance and inclusion in national systems – helps realize the GCR objectives affirmed by the UN General Assembly in 2018.

Socioeconomic data and evidence are essential to sustainable responses. They justify new approaches, inform programme design, guide implementation and support monitoring. By assessing the needs of both refugees and host communities, governments, humanitarian agencies and development partners can develop evidence-based strategies that address immediate needs while fostering long-term resilience. That means investing in inclusive national education and health systems, employment opportunities and initiatives that protect refugees and enable their contribution to local economies.

The need is urgent. Millions of displaced Sudanese need more than emergency aid – they need access to schools and jobs. Syrians returning home after more than a decade of displacement need support to reintegrate and rebuild. Across refugee-hosting contexts, sound policy depends on good data.

This report highlights how governments, UNHCR and partners are leveraging socioeconomic data and evidence to guide policy, shape programming and inform advocacy. In places where data gaps remain, UNHCR is investing in efforts – developed with national statistics offices – to lay the groundwork for better planning with development partners.

Supporting refugees and host communities requires creating the conditions for families to be self-reliant. When people can work, learn and participate in society, displacement shifts from being solely a humanitarian challenge to a chance for growth and renewal.

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This publication was managed by the Research and Analytics Unit of the Division of Resilience and Solutions (DRS), with country examples provided by UNHCR economists embedded in Regional Bureaux and Country Operations. Special thanks to the DRS leadership for their overall guidance and support.

Cover photo: UNHCR provides lifesaving services to South Sudanese returnees fleeing conflict in Sudan. Assistance helps families rebuild their lives through essential aid, onward transport and durable solutions in return areas. © UNHCR/Reason Moses Runyanga

From Perceptions to Facts: Evidence Shows How Refugees and Migrants Contribute to Costa Rica's Economy

Costa Rica has a strong tradition of hospitality toward refugees and migrants. But as fiscal conditions tighten, host communities often perceive their arrival, most notably from Nicaragua, as an economic strain rather than an opportunity. To bring facts into the conversation, UNHCR partnered with the International Monetary Fund and the Inter-American Development Bank to develop an analysis featured in the **IMF Country Report** that profiled the Nicaraguan population and quantified its economic impact.

The findings are clear: Nicaraguan refugees and migrants play a vital role in Costa Rica's economy. Their labour force participation helps offset an ageing workforce, and their tax contributions surpass the costs of hosting them. Yet, they remain economically vulnerable, earning less than Costa Ricans in similar jobs.

Nicaraguan refugees and migrants showcase their small businesses at an Entrepreneurs Fair.
© UNHCR/Daniel Aguedas

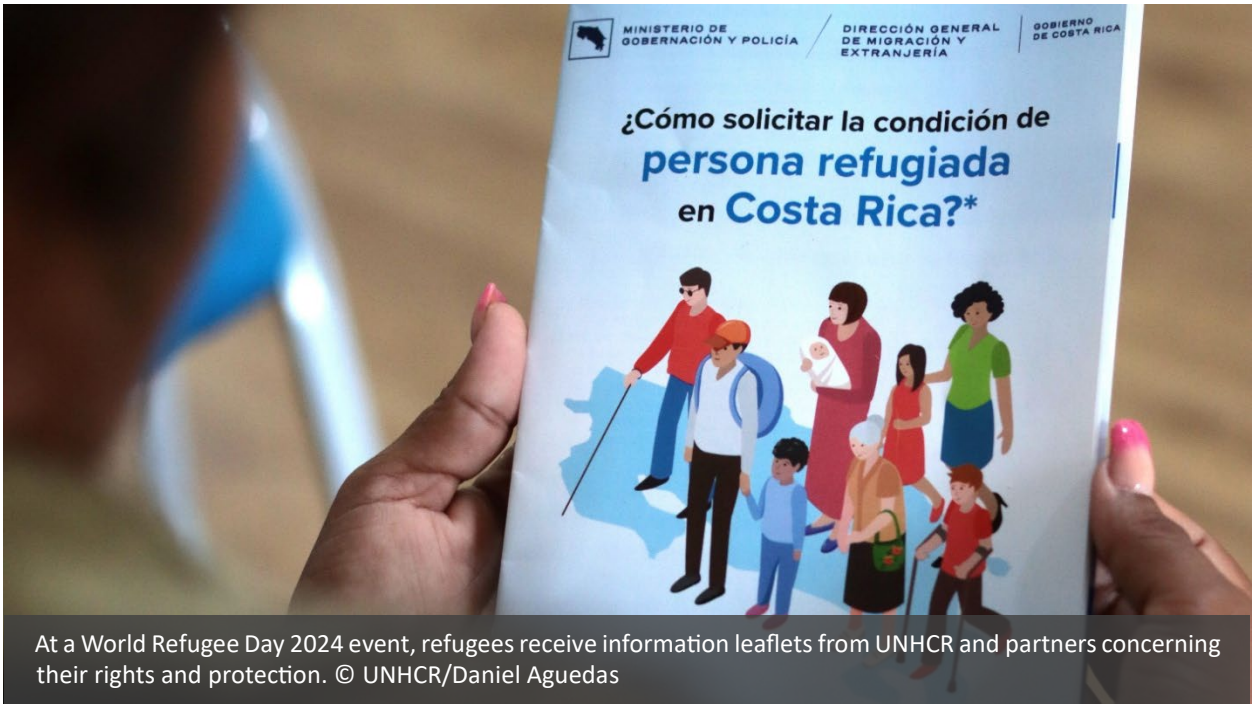
These insights have driven policy discussions at the highest levels. The IMF incorporated the analysis into its **Article IV consultation**, influencing macroeconomic guidance, while **Costa Rican media** used the findings to inform a national debate on labour market inclusion.

The studies also explored gender dynamics in the workforce. They found that Costa Rican women, particularly high-skilled ones, benefit from the presence of Nicaraguan workers who complement rather than compete for jobs. But fair working conditions are a concern, especially in domestic work, where professionalization and legal protections would benefit both groups.

By generating robust and credible evidence, UNHCR and its partners are better positioned to advocate for policies that recognize refugees and migrants as economic contributors and enable their inclusion in all areas of society.

Strengthened policy dialogue in Latin America through joint evidence generation

UNHCR partnered with the IDB and OECD to expand the evidence base on the economic and social integration of forcibly displaced populations in Latin America. The region-wide report on Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Mexico, Ecuador and Peru helped elevate the conversation around socioeconomic integration in regional economic planning and high-level policy discussions. The findings, discussed at a high-level event in the lead up to the World Bank's Fragility Forum 2024, have informed regional efforts to advance the Global Compact on Refugees, including the Cartagena +40 process.



At a World Refugee Day 2024 event, refugees receive information leaflets from UNHCR and partners concerning their rights and protection. © UNHCR/Daniel Aguedas

Studies Inform Landmark Policy Changes in Kenya

Kenya has long hosted a significant refugee and stateless population, and expanding their economic inclusion has become increasingly central to both individual well-being and local development. Recent investments in data and evidence have been instrumental in shaping policy dialogue and informing government-led efforts to improve access to jobs, social protection and essential services. This growing evidence base helped underpin the Government of Kenya's endorsement of the **Shirika Plan**, which aims to transform camps into settlements that function as economic hubs, where inclusion in public services, development and opportunity will replace long-term dependence on humanitarian aid.

From stateless to graduates: Shona youth in Kenya reclaim their future through citizenship and education.
© UNHCR/Charity Nzomo

A major initiative making a difference is the **Kenya Longitudinal Study of Refugees and Host Communities (K-LSR)**, a partnership between UNHCR, the World Bank and the University of California, Berkeley. The ongoing panel survey tracks the socioeconomic integration of refugees over time, collecting data on income, employment and barriers to economic participation. Its insights have shaped innovative programming in refugee-hosting areas and informed the design of the Shirika Plan. As implementation advances, the data will be invaluable for evaluating progress and impact. Notably, K-LSR data also informed the inclusion of refugees in Kenya's National Financial Inclusion Strategy (2025-27) – a foundational step towards long-term socioeconomic inclusion.

Similarly, a **socioeconomic study on the Shona community** illustrates the value of timely data in supporting policy shifts. After Kenya granted citizenship to the formerly stateless Shona population, a follow-up study found marked improvements in access to employment, education and financial services, demonstrating the tangible economic and social benefits of legal recognition. The findings reinforce the case for granting citizenship to stateless groups elsewhere.

Progress on national statistical inclusion across East and Horn of Africa and the Great Lakes

An essential step toward full socioeconomic inclusion is ensuring forcibly displaced and stateless persons are counted in national statistics. As outlined in the **Global Refugee Forum multi-stakeholder pledge**, doing so ensures their needs are considered in national planning. Government-led data collection gives policymakers the facts needed to better understand population demographics and vulnerabilities and develop good policies. Since early 2024, refugees have been included in census and survey exercises in Burundi, Djibouti, Ethiopia, Kenya, Rwanda and Uganda – marking meaningful progress towards inclusive national plans.

Ethiopia's **Socio-Economic Survey of Refugees in Ethiopia (SESRE)** is an illustrative example: its analysis of the living conditions of host communities and refugees contributed to the Government of Ethiopia's decision to issue a new **Right to Work Directive** in 2024, expanding opportunities for refugees to contribute to the national economy.

Students mark International Women's Day 2025 in Dadaab Camp, Kenya. © UNHCR/Mohamed Maalim

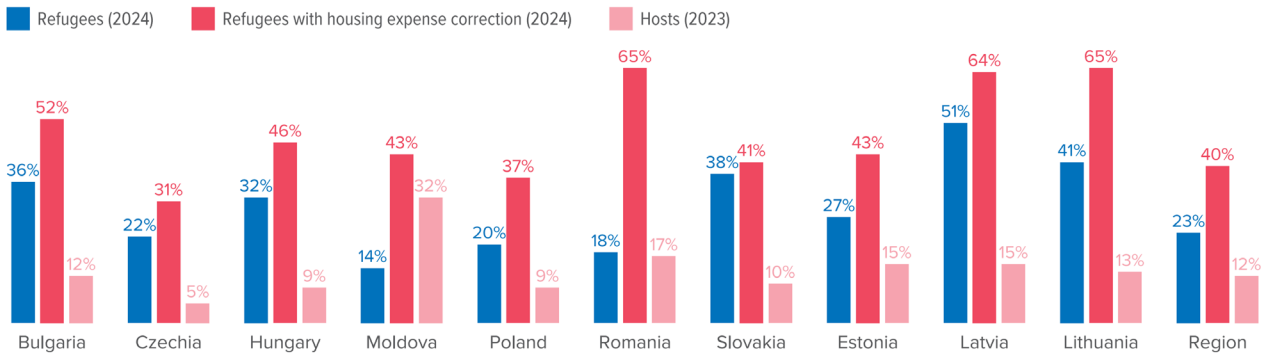
Understanding Economic Vulnerability Among Ukrainian Refugees and IDPs: Insights for Policy and Programming

To support more effective regional policy and programming in response to the Ukraine situation, UNHCR coordinated an interagency analysis of socioeconomic data collected through a survey conducted in 10 partner countries of the **Regional Refugee Response Plan**.

The resulting **UNHCR-led report** highlights the continued economic vulnerability of Ukrainian refugees in host countries. Despite progress, an estimated 40% of refugees live in poverty after accounting for the disproportionately high housing costs they face compared to their hosts. Moreover, while Ukrainian employment rates have nearly reached national levels in all 10 countries, significant underemployment and skills mismatches continue to suppress income growth. These findings provide timely and important insights, informing strategies that will strengthen Ukrainians' socioeconomic inclusion.

Similar interagency analyses in 2024 already helped shape partners' strategies across the region. The IMF, for instance, drew on findings from UNHCR's **Helping Hands** study into its influential **Article IV consultation** for Poland, noting the contributions of Ukrainian refugees to the labour market and recommending further support in language training, social services, transportation and recognition of foreign credentials. These recommendations complement evidence from a separate **UNHCR-Deloitte** study, which found that Ukrainian refugees helped ease labour shortages and contributed significantly to Poland's economic growth.

REFUGEE POVERTY RATES WITH AND WITHOUT CORRECTION FOR EXCESSIVE HOUSING COSTS



Source: Eurostat, survey data, SAG estimates

Within Ukraine, UNHCR is also working to close key evidence gaps around internally displaced persons (IDPs). A recent study on **access to social protection** sheds light on how vulnerable populations, including IDPs, navigate the national social protection system.

The strength and timeliness of this analysis enabled UNHCR to bring together government officials, development partners and stakeholders for a **high-level event** focused on shaping more inclusive approaches to social protection.

Market Assessment Data Promotes Private Sector Engagement in Bangladesh

The Rohingya refugee influx has now entered its eighth year, shifting from an emergency to a protracted situation. Around 1.2 million Rohingya refugees live in Cox's Bazar and Bhasan Char, and their well-being depends on expanding opportunities for income generation and market participation. UNHCR and its partners are working to expand livelihood opportunities and engage the private sector to enhance refugees' self-reliance and support sustainable solutions.

While there are legal barriers around the right to work, own a business and move freely, informal economies have taken root in Cox's Bazar and Bhasan Char. To better understand how these markets function, UNHCR conducted the first market assessment of its kind in both locations in late 2024.

The assessment reveals intricate supply chains that link Rohingya refugees and host communities, as well as how refugees' activities contribute to the local economies of refugee-hosting areas (see flow diagram). It also highlights existing constraints and opportunities that can be addressed and leveraged to unlock the potential of the large refugee and host populations and their markets.

These valuable data and insights offer an evidence base that is acutely relevant to ongoing policy discussions with government agencies, development partners and the private sector on expanding self-reliance and economic resilience for both refugees and host communities.

The market assessment complements a study by UNHCR and the World Bank to compare refugee livelihoods in two distinct settlement contexts: the established camps of Cox's Bazar and the recently developed, geographically isolated site of Bhasan Char. Leveraging data from the **Cox's Bazar Panel Survey**, the analysis shows significant differences in employment opportunities between both locations and a heavy reliance on international assistance to support humanitarian employment programmes. As donor support decreases, the studies make it clear that advancing

market-driven livelihood options is urgent, both to strengthen local economies and foster social cohesion between refugees and host communities.

Rohingya refugees added to the 2025 Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS)

For the first time, Rohingya refugees in Cox's Bazar will be included in the national 2025 MICS survey, UNICEF's survey on the health, education and well-being of women and children. This effort was made possible through UNHCR facilitation and funding from the UNHCR-World Bank Joint Data Center. The refugee component of the MICS aims to generate comprehensive data on the social and economic conditions of refugees residing in Cox's Bazar and Bhasan Char, supporting evidence-based policymaking and resource mobilization. The integration of refugee data into broader development planning frameworks and policy discussions aligns with the UN Sustainable Development Goal of leaving no one behind.

In Cox's Bazar, where 52% of the Rohingya refugee population is under 18, Rohingya and Bangladeshi teachers work together, teaching children to read, count and speak the Myanmar language. © UNHCR/Amos Halder

Planning for Refugee Returns in South Sudan: Evidence Reveals Service Gaps for Prioritized Investment

In South Sudan, communities living with fragile infrastructure continue to receive South Sudanese returnees and Sudanese refugees fleeing the conflict in Sudan, placing added pressure on overstretched public services.

To help local governments and communities prepare and respond, UNHCR partnered with the consultancy Samuel Hall to conduct **community-based assessments** that identify what returning families need – such as schools, health services and clean water – and evaluate the quality of existing infrastructure across essential sectors. This work is part of a wider service gap analysis conducted by UNHCR, with support from EU-INTPA, across four key return areas in South Sudan: Aweil, Torit/Magwi, Raja and Yei/Morobo. The goal is to provide a clearer, data-backed picture of where investments are most needed to support returnees, refugees and local communities.

By combining site visits, local consultations and data collection, the effort aims to ensure that planning is rooted in the realities on the ground and prioritizes investments that are inclusive. For example, in Aweil, a key destination for people fleeing Sudan, the assessment found that local health services were already operating at full capacity. But it also pointed to solutions, such as upgrading just three of nine health facilities – rather than building new ones – to improve efficiency and meet rising demand. These findings are informing conversations with partners, including the European Union, World Bank and UN-Habitat on investment priorities, such as integrated settlement planning that strengthens services for all.

With continued arrivals from Sudan and limited funding, essential services in host areas in South Sudan are overstretched, exposing refugees and returnees to health risks. © UNHCR/Reason Moses Runyanga

At the same time, joint border monitoring with the IOM and the Government of South Sudan is providing real-time data on arrivals and the immediate needs of returnees, helping partners tailor their responses. A shared dashboard tracks movements and return intentions, offering essential insights into conditions on the ground and guiding efforts to provide targeted assistance, as well as shaping reintegration programming aligned with national development goals.

South Sudan leads with new UNHCR Forced Displacement Survey

In 2024, South Sudan became the first country to release results from UNHCR's flagship **Forced Displacement Survey** (FDS), a global initiative to generate comparable socioeconomic data for detailed analysis reflecting the living conditions and welfare of refugees and host communities. Implemented by UNHCR in partnership with the National Bureau of Statistics, the FDS aligns with international standards and builds momentum towards full statistical inclusion, in line with South Sudan's pledge at the **Global Refugee Forum**.

The survey's insights have informed programming and policies at a crucial time as the country responds to arrivals fleeing increased fighting in neighbouring Sudan. In addition, an experimental sample on returnees provides a deeper understanding of the complex reintegration process, contributing to the government's Durable Solutions Strategy and Plan of Action for Refugees, Internally Displaced Persons, Returnees and Host Communities.

After fleeing to Sudan a decade ago, a South Sudanese woman returns to home with her family—this time escaping violence in Sudan. She hopes to rebuild her life with support from UNHCR and partners. © UNHCR/Sarah Velascodo

Enabling National Policies in Brazil Through Analytics

In Brazil, UNHCR's partnership with the government continues to strengthen the national response to the arrival of Venezuelan refugees and migrants. Now in its eighth year, the government-led voluntary relocation programme, **Operation Welcome**, has adapted through ongoing assessments supported by UNHCR. At its core, this approach reflects Brazil's commitment to inclusive policymaking that aims to help Venezuelans rebuild their lives while contributing to the host communities.

Collaboration between UNHCR, Brazil's Ministry of Labour and Employment, and the World Bank has helped track workforce trends among Venezuelan refugees and migrants through quarterly **policy briefs** on employment and economic inclusion. These briefs highlight persistent barriers faced by vulnerable groups, such as low-skilled workers and single mothers, and have strengthened programmatic connections between jobs, housing, and education. These insights are guiding national policy discussions and pairing job programmes with skills training and housing support for both refugees and host communities, helping families build more stable futures.

Venezuelan families living in shelters in Brazil voluntarily participated in Brazil's 2022 census. ©UNHCR/Camila Ignacio Geraldo

Brazil has also made strides in inclusive data collection. In 2022, forcibly displaced populations were included in the national census for the first time. This milestone was achieved through UNHCR's collaboration with Brazil's national statistical office (IBGE), including training enumerators and engaging Venezuelan communities to encourage participation. The resulting data has given authorities a clearer picture of refugee demographics, which helps in the design of economic and social plans that account for their presence.

Refugee integration is also advancing through efforts to improve the recognition and accreditation of refugee diplomas. A UNHCR study found that refugees with validated diplomas reported higher family incomes and better quality of life. These findings have encouraged more universities to streamline diploma validation processes for refugees, removing a critical barrier to skilled employment and supporting self-reliance.

From Numbers to Impact: Mauritania's Model for Refugee-Inclusive Planning

In Mauritania, a groundbreaking survey by UNHCR and the World Food Programme has provided the first comprehensive snapshot of the living conditions of over 118,000 Malian refugees, most of whom arrived after renewed conflict in 2023. Their arrival has doubled the country's refugee population, placing new demands on national systems and services.

The data reveals urgent needs:

- 76% of refugees arrived after December 2023
- 64% live in makeshift shelters outside formal camps
- 18% are experiencing homelessness
- Only 3% of households have access to a latrine, making open defecation the norm

These findings are more than statistics – they are a catalyst for change. The evidence is already shaping national policy and programming. A **UNHCR-World Bank brief** is informing government planning, guiding donor engagement and supporting UNHCR's strategic outreach at the highest levels. The government agreed to an out-of-camp approach to the new refugee emergency, which allows for freedom of movement and investments to be directed towards a "development approach". The data generated is essential for designing such an approach.

Malian refugees in Mbera Camp in the Hodh Chargui region of Mauritania, near the border with Mali. © UNHCR/Xavier Bourgois

Crucially, the data has sparked broader momentum for deeper, more inclusive analysis. There is growing demand to compare refugee and host community conditions and to integrate refugee data into national surveys, such as:

- Enquête Permanente sur les Conditions de Vie des Ménages (EPCV)
- Labour Force Survey
- UNICEF's Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS)

In partnership with Mauritania's national statistics office (ANSADE), UNHCR and the World Bank, with the World Bank-UNHCR Joint Data Center, are helping embed refugee populations into national data systems. This collaboration is a model for how inclusive data can drive equitable, sustainable responses, ensuring no one is left behind.

Middle East and North Africa: supporting governments in implementing GRF pledges

UNHCR is supporting governments in implementing Global Refugee Forum pledges to include forcibly displaced and stateless persons in national statistics. In November 2024, a regional workshop in Egypt – organized with EGRISS, UNESCWA and the League of Arab States – brought together 12 countries in MENA (Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Palestine, Syria, Tunisia and Yemen) as well as UN partners to share good practices and build capacity to apply global recommendations.

The event also strengthened collaboration among refugee focal points, planning ministries, statistical offices and other national stakeholders. Six MENA countries (Algeria, Iraq, Jordan, Mauritania, Morocco and Tunisia) have now included or committed to include forcibly displaced and stateless persons in national census and a further five countries have committed to or have recently generated comparable poverty data for forcibly displaced and nationals (Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Mauritania and Yemen).

In Iraq, these efforts are gaining traction. In November 2024, the country's first census in three decades included refugee and displaced populations, demonstrating the government's commitment to inclusive national surveys. The Kurdistan Regional Statistical Office, with support from UNHCR, the World Bank and the Joint Data Center, has committed to conducting the Iraq Household Socioeconomic Survey III (IHSES III) in 2025, which will generate comparable poverty data for refugees and nationals.

At present, the Government of Iraq (both at the federal and Kurdistan regional levels) is revising targeting criteria for the Social Safety Net (SSN) Program using IHSES III data for nationals. A standalone refugee sample will allow for a similar exercise for refugees to assess the number and cost should the government consider their inclusion in the SSN. The data will also inform budgeting decisions and support other initiatives, such as the Dutch-funded Prospects partnership, which is exploring the pilot of including refugee households in the social protection programme in Dohuk governorate of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

Analysis that Shines a Light on Refugee Self-Reliance in Togo

In Togo's Savanna region, where more than 90% of the country's refugee population lives, UNHCR partnered with the government to carry out a socioeconomic survey to better understand the living conditions of refugee families. The data also enabled the calculation of the **Self-Reliance Index**, providing a clearer picture of how refugees are progressing toward greater self-reliance.

The analysis revealed significant vulnerabilities across nearly all dimensions of well-being, with especially acute challenges in economic and financial stability. Many refugees are heavily in debt, highly dependent on humanitarian assistance and have limited access to employment. The data also highlights key factors associated with self-reliance: refugees with access to electricity, a bank account, income-generating activities and an intention to remain in the community reported higher levels of socioeconomic resilience.

Building on these insights, UNHCR developed a roadmap for the Savanna region that outlines priority steps to strengthen refugee self-reliance. Guided by data and developed with partners, the framework helps ensure more targeted support, enabling refugees and host communities to earn a living, access essential services and lay the groundwork for a more stable future.

Refugee and host community women harvest vegetables in Biankouri as part of a community savings and loan association focused on market gardening, supported by UNHCR. © UNHCR/Lokossa

West and Central Africa: opportunities for evidence to make a difference

Across the region, many refugees face protracted displacement. Implementing sustainable solutions requires an understanding of the barriers hindering economic self-reliance and using data to inform the way forward. UNHCR and its partners are working with governments to generate evidence that strengthens national strategies and attracts development financing.

Burkina Faso: In partnership with the National Institute of Statistics and Demography (INSD), UNHCR is conducting a socioeconomic and protection survey to assess the links between

economic hardship and protection risks. The data will inform a joint report with development actors – including the World Bank and World Food Programme – analysing how displacement affects livelihoods, security and coping strategies. The evidence will support more targeted programming, particularly World Bank interventions, and help expand investments for refugee-hosting areas.

Chad: UNHCR is working with the World Bank, African Development Bank (AfDB), EU Directorate-General for International Partnerships (DG INTPA), the French development agency (AFD) and the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) to strengthen resilience programming in refugee-hosting areas. Robust analytics underpins a business case being developed to demonstrate the return on current investments and their impact, aiming to catalyze funding from donors.

Cameroon: Together with the National Institute of Statistics (INS), UNHCR implemented the **Forced Displacement Survey**, complemented by a household consumption module. The data are being used to assess ongoing efforts to enhance refugee self-reliance and to inform discussions on inclusion in national systems. The evidence will inform ongoing policy dialogue with the Government of Cameroon and the EU on the future of the Minawao refugee camp and deepen engagement with development partners.

Taking Stock of the Costs and Benefits of Socioeconomic Inclusion

As conflict and weather-related disasters push forced displacement to historic levels, governments face tough decisions around supporting people forced to flee and the costs to their countries and citizens. The UN General Assembly (A/RES/78/184) has tasked UNHCR with leading a global effort to **measure the impact of hosting, protecting and assisting refugees** – not just to identify funding gaps, but to promote more equitable sharing of burden and responsibility.

This collaborative effort between UNHCR, the World Bank and the Joint Data Centre on Forced Displacement brings governments together to assess the costs of integrating refugees into national systems. The focus is on education, healthcare and basic subsistence – areas that make up the lion's share of public expenditures and are essential for helping refugees rebuild their lives.

With displacement rising and budgets stretched, these global costing exercises show that investing in sustainable solutions, such as including refugees in national schools, health systems and local labour markets, is more urgent than ever.

Done right, these policies foster self-reliance, strengthen host economies and reduce long-term aid dependency.

The global cost assessments provide a blueprint for understanding the fiscal impact of refugee inclusion, but real change happens at the national level. Each country faces unique economic and social realities, and these costing frameworks can be adapted to help governments assess expenses more accurately and shape policies that work within their country contexts.

UNHCR and the World Bank are prepared to support **national-level costing exercises upon request**, building on the technical groundwork of the Measuring Impact initiative. They can assist governments in applying these models to develop evidence-based policies that strengthen host communities and promote refugee inclusion with sustainable financing.

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