UNHCR
The UN Refugee Agency

SAHEL+ STRATEGY

Strengthening Protection and Resilience in the Sahel: UNHCR's strategic approach 2026 - 2027

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Refugee woman sitting at the community center in Ouagadougou. © UNHCR/ M.BOUGMA

Introduction

Against a backdrop of evolving displacement patterns, shifting regional dynamics, and constrained resources, UNHCR's 2026–2027 Strategic Approach for the Sahel Plus sets out how UNHCR will strengthen protection and advance solutions for the forcibly displaced and those at risk of statelessness. It focuses on the countries most affected by forced displacement in the region, Burkina Faso, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, and the coastal countries of Benin, Ghana, Côte d'Ivoire, and Togo, collectively referred to as the Sahel Plus countries. [1]

> The Strategic Approach builds on ongoing engagement, and constructive dialogue with Sahel and coastal states on their national priorities, engagement with UN sister agencies to ensure coordinated action, and collaboration with development and private sector actors and civil society, including refugee-led organizations. It is anchored in the broader UN reform agenda, notably the humanitarian reset and the UN80 agenda, calling for greater coherence and cross-pillar delivery across the UN system.

It highlights three priority areas common to all Sahel Plus countries, maintaining life-saving emergency assistance, strengthening protection and advancing solutions, and advancing social and economic inclusion for greater self-reliance.

[1] The phrases 'Central Sahel', referring to Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso, and 'Sahel Plus are not official names or administrative regions, but are given to better explain the geographic context.

Forced Displacement and Protection Trends

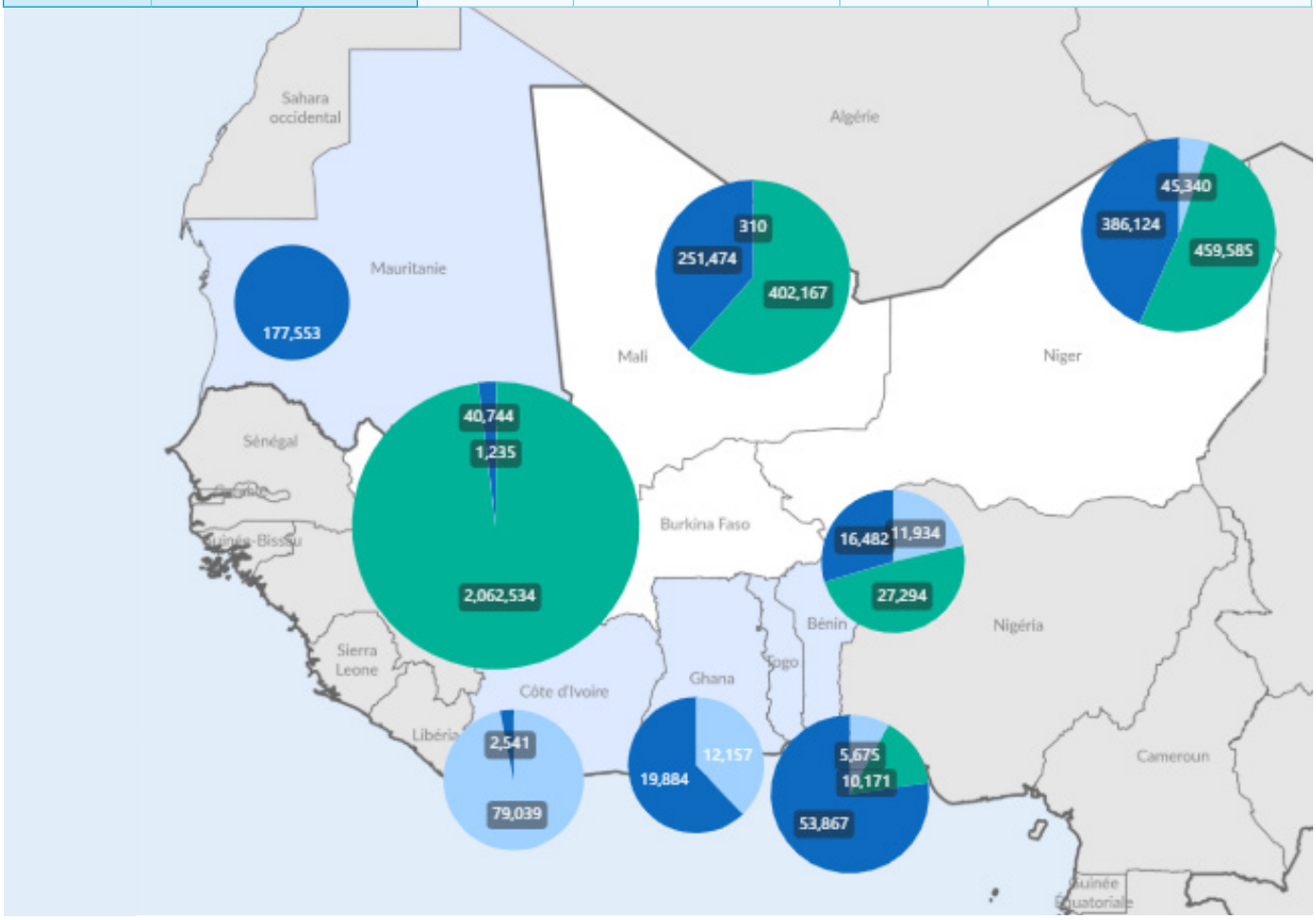
Despite the resilience of communities in the Sahel, the region remains deeply affected by overlapping crises of conflict, insecurity, socio-economic factors and climate stress. The number of forcibly displaced people (refugees and internally displaced people) in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger had reached 3.65 million by September 2025, up 80 per cent since 2020. In addition, by the end of September 2025, there were over 700,000 refugees and asylum seekers originating from the Central Sahel, three times the 2020 figures. These figures include over 200,000 refugees and asylum-seekers now hosted in Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana and Togo, in addition to some 177,000 registered refugees and asylum seekers in Mauritania — underscoring how displacement dynamics have expanded beyond the Central Sahel into the wider West African region. At the same time, efforts made by the authorities in the Sahel have allowed for the return of internally displaced persons (IDPs) to their areas of origin, accentuating the need to bolster efforts around self reliance and resilience to ensure that returns are sustainable.

Total Forcibly Displaced Population in Sahel Plus as of September 2025

4.07 million
Forcibly displaced people

Including
3.0 million
Internally displaced people (IDPs)

Including
1.1 million
Refugees and asylum-seekers



The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations.

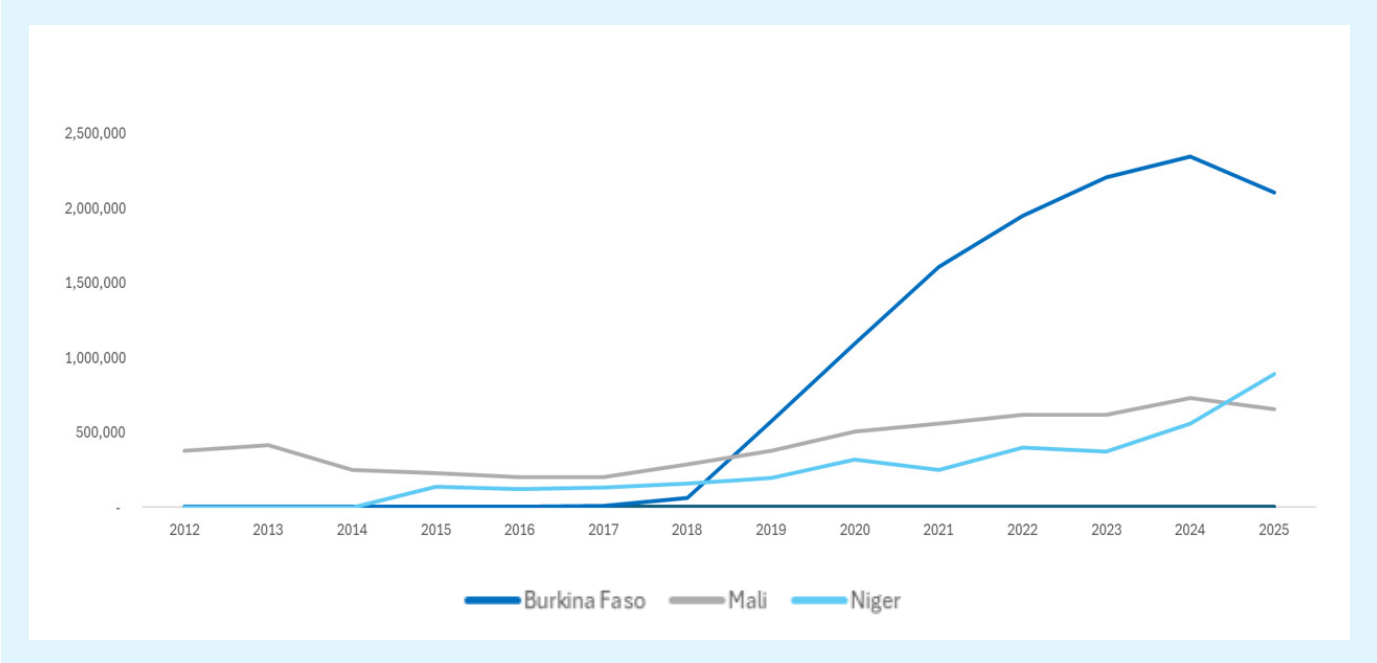


Figure 1: Trends in Forced Displacement people (For Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger) | 2012 - September 2025

Key protection risks in the Sahel include **armed violence, access issues due to insecurity, abduction and detention, and family separation.** Armed violence remains the primary cause of forced displacement, exposing civilians to repeated attacks and heightening overall protection risks. As 80% of forcibly displaced persons registered and enrolled in the Sahel Plus are women and children, gender-based violence and child protection are particular concerns. **Education** continues to be severely disrupted by insecurity. School closures linked to violence have nearly doubled since 2019, reaching over 14,800 by mid-2025. During the 2024-2025 school year, an estimated 64% of refugee children in the region were not enrolled in primary nor secondary school, share reaching 70% on average in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, with over 118,000 school-aged refugee children away from classrooms.

© UNHCR Mali

At 43, Adamou Chamsou, a Malian refugee in Ouallam, Niger, is a butcher and farmer, a job that allows him to provide for his family and regain his independence. © UNHCR Niger / Helen Ngoh Ada

At Sayam Forage, Diffa, Mahaman, a 50-year-old Nigerian refugee, takes care of 2,000 trees that provide protection from strong winds and create a green space for the community. © UNHCR Niger / Helen Ngoh Ada

Beyond direct protection risks, food insecurity has become a major driver of displacement. The proportion of displaced people and host community members citing food insecurity, including as a result of conflict-induced lack of access to land to cultivate, as a factor has nearly doubled in recent years.

Local mechanisms for conflict management and social cohesion are under pressure in some areas, underscoring the importance of supporting existing community structures.

Climate change acts as a risk multiplier.

Competition over land, water, and other natural resources—exacerbated by population movements and declining livelihoods—has intensified. As a result of **insecurity, restricted access to livelihoods opportunities and persistent food insecurity**, capitals, secondary cities, and rural commune centers have become the main destinations for displaced populations. Combined with rapid demographic growth, **this has accelerated urbanization across the Sahel**.

These interlinked issues demand integrated approaches that bridge humanitarian response, development investment, and peacebuilding efforts. UNHCR's Sahel Plus approach builds on national ownership, regional cooperation, and deep-rooted traditions of solidarity. Anchoring action in national systems and local capacities promotes sustainability and self-reliance, strengthening community resilience over time.

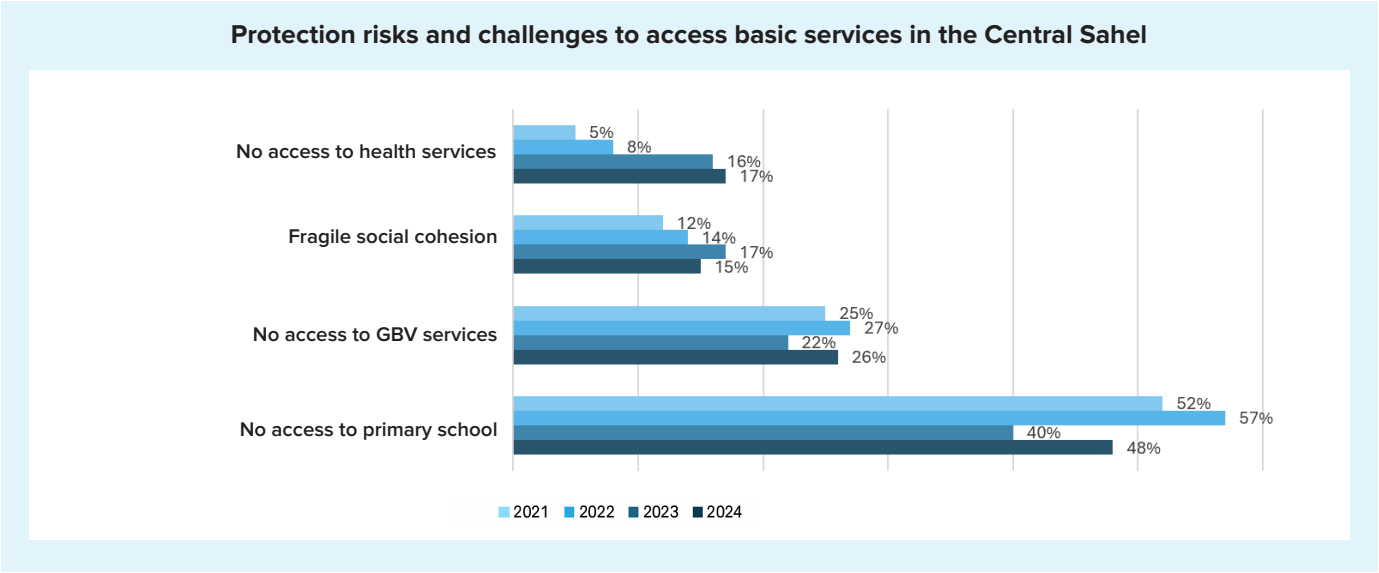


Figure 2: Evolution of the social cohesion risks and challenges to access basic services, as declared by the 35,213 families and 28,547 communities surveyed in the Central Sahel (Burkina Faso, Mali, Western Niger) from 2021 to 2024 (source: Project 21)

Opportunities for advancing protection and solutions in the Sahel Plus

Strong legal and policy foundations

All Sahel Plus countries are parties to the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol, as well as the OAU Refugee Convention, and almost all have adopted national asylum laws that enable inclusion, including the right to work and freedom of movement. All have ratified the Kampala Convention on internal displacement. All States have acceded to the 1954 Convention relating to the Status of Stateless Persons and the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness, or committed to do so as part of their Global Refugee Forum pledges. At the 2023 Global Refugee Forum, Sahel Plus states made around 40 pledges to expand refugee socio-economic inclusion, in addition to inclusion in education, health and social protection systems, scale up climate and environment action, and transition from camps toward sustainable settlements, as exemplified by Mauritania.

Strengthened regional frameworks and platforms

The Lomé Dialogue, initiated in 2024 by the Governments of Togo, Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, and Burkina Faso, in collaboration with UNHCR, has significantly contributed to strengthen cross-border collaboration, information sharing and policy coherence to address forced displacement. Its goal is to help states balance national security concerns with international obligations to protect refugees. At the ministerial meeting in July 2025, States endorsed key recommendations and committed to a sub-regional protection and solutions strategy (2026–2030) which aims to convert political momentum into a coordinated operational framework.

ECOWAS, with UNHCR support, has developed a draft regional asylum policy to strengthen regional asylum systems harmonization and ensure alignment between national policies and international and regional legal protection standards.

Renewed humanitarian commitments in the Alliance of Sahel States (AES)

The first *Alliance des États du Sahel* (AES) (Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger) Humanitarian Forum from 7 to 9 August 2025 in Bamako, offered an opportunity to exchange on humanitarian priorities and explore avenues for enhanced collaboration, including community-based approaches, preparedness, solutions and the integration of the climate–security–peace and development nexus into humanitarian operations.

Concrete inclusion and solutions initiatives

Governments in the region are transitioning away from traditional approaches to assistance, including refugee camp/site models, toward more sustainable and integrated solutions. These efforts have included co-location with or in close proximity to existing communities expanding access to basic services, urban planning initiatives, access to social housing, and agriculture/livelihood programming. Collaboration with development actors and UN agencies has been instrumental in advancing these approaches, including flagship programmes.

Together, these political, legal, and operational openings provide a foundation for scaling protection, inclusion, and durable solutions through coordinated regional action under the Sahel Plus framework.

Principles Guiding Our Approach

Children collecting water | Faguana © UNHCR Mali

A focus on the most vulnerable. Major financial constraints require a strong prioritization of interventions, focusing on the most at-risk or vulnerable individuals to reduce structural precariousness that increases exposure to protection risks and socio-economic exclusion dynamics. Children—especially those who are unaccompanied or separated—and youth, as well as single women or female-headed households, will be prioritized both in emergency response and in efforts to support inclusion through community participation, education, and economic opportunities. Older people and people with disabilities, along with their families, are also at the core of this focused approach. Prevention of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse mechanisms, and Accountability to Affected Populations will continue to be embedded in all interventions to ensure that the most vulnerable individuals are protected from abuse and exploitation, and that their voices, needs, and rights are at the center.

An Area-Based Approach. UNHCR programming in the Sahel uses an area-based approach focusing on the needs and opportunities within a defined geographic area rather than targeting specific population groups in isolation. This approach recognizes that displacement and vulnerability affect local host communities which must be included in the response, and that both emergency assistance and sustainable responses require inclusive, locally grounded interventions. It promotes local ownership by engaging local authorities, community organizations, and local service providers in planning and implementation. It also helps bridge humanitarian response with longer-term development goals by working in a localized manner on existing inclusion options.

Kadidja Chaibou, a malian refugee, in the ruins of her home swept away by flood waters in Harobanda, Niamey. | © UNHCR/Helen Ngoh

Mainstreaming climate and environmental sensitivity into planning. The combination of pre-existing conflicts over access to water and land, intense human pressure on natural resources in displacement areas (such as widespread tree cutting for cooking fuel and shelter, and overuse of agricultural land), and the effects of climate change — including rising temperatures, episodes of drought, or torrential rains causing floods — create a complex situation. Integrating humanitarian assistance with climate resilience and sustainable resource management is essential. Climate resilience and adaptation capacity in displacement affected areas will be strengthened through locally tailored, innovative, and transformative climate solutions (investing in sustainable infrastructure, water security and climate-smart food systems; green energy access and sustainable value chains).

Evidence-Based and Data-Driven Action. Access constraints, the reduction in the presence of actors in the field, and the constantly shifting displacement dynamics require evidence to monitor the evolving situation and support advocacy and collective decision-making. UNHCR will build on its evidence-generation expertise in forced displacement, fragile and conflict-affected settings as well as on its past data investments, with all relevant stakeholders. The inter-agency P21 initiative, supported by UNHCR, will continue to provide harmonized, regular, and reliable information on protection risks, informing improved responses, advocacy, programming and inclusion efforts across the Humanitarian, Development and Peacebuilding Nexus. UNHCR will continue to support governments in ensuring refugee registration, coupled with socio-economic profiling. Increased work with national statistics offices is also central to this approach as is national ownership through the inclusion of forcibly displaced persons in major national surveys. Partnerships, such as those through the UNHCR and World Bank Joint Data Center on Forced Displacement, will support the generation of topic and context-specific studies and analyses.

Tilabery, Physical Health check and biometric registration
© UNHCR/Helen Ngoh

Priorities (2026 – 2027)

Abala Integrated Health Center (CSI) - Refugee receiving health consultation | © UNHCR/Helen Ngoh

Deliver Life-saving Emergency Assistance

UNHCR and UN partners will support governments to safeguard life-saving assistance and protection in acute and protracted crises, including hard-to-reach and border areas. Maintaining emergency response preparedness capacity in the Sahel is essential given the nature and evolution of the situation in the region. Displacement movements are not only frequent—they are also unpredictable, requiring a rapid response capacity to meet the immediate needs of displaced populations. An emergency response helps limit this deterioration by providing life-saving assistance in the early stages of displacement, while also laying out the groundwork for inclusion.

UNHCR will:

- Strengthen the capacity of national institutions and community structures to respond to displacement crises in a timely manner, including through community-based readiness contingency planning.
- Establish or strengthen mechanisms to identify and respond to the needs of individuals at risk in new forced displacement situations, as well as to prevent tensions in displacement areas.
- Support authorities in registration or enrolment efforts to facilitate access to assistance and services, on coordination, and to enable collective planning.
- Provide emergency assistance in kind or in cash, as soon as the context allows, enabling access to protection and essential services, and for families to meet their priority needs in a flexible and dignified manner.
- Support governments to strengthen essential services—such as water, health, and education—in refugee-hosting areas during the emergency phase to improve absorption capacity and support both displaced and host populations.

Strengthen Protection and Advance Solutions

Sahel countries face the complex task of addressing internal displacement, hosting growing numbers of refugees, while also serving as areas of origin, transit, and destination within global mixed movement dynamics. As legitimate internal security considerations gain prominence in national decision-making, governments are striving to maintain a balance with their international obligations towards communities affected by forced displacement, with the support of key stakeholders such as the United Nations system, civil society organizations (CSOs), development and private sector actors. Social cohesion in a fragile socio-economic and environmental context is another key priority. In this context, UNHCR will deliver its core protection and solutions mandate and provide differentiated responses to strengthen the protection environment.

UNHCR will:

- Support states to guarantee access to territory and to strengthen their asylum systems while taking into consideration their national security concerns.
- Support local community-based mechanisms as critical protection providers, reinforcing trust and ownership at the community level, and promoting inclusion.
- Support local mediation and conflict-resolution initiatives that enhance social cohesion and reduce protection risks in displacement-affected areas.
- Jointly with government authorities and partners, including IOM, build on the ongoing implementation of the Route-Based Approach in the region to better meet protection needs and pursue solutions along known mixed movement corridors.
- Enhance access to third country solutions including resettlement and complementary pathways, local alternatives to risky onward movements .
- Support the creation of conditions conducive to return and sustainable reintegration, including through advocacy for programmes to support the resilience of populations in their areas of returns .

Information, Education and Communication, IEC Mali. © UNHCR

Advance Social and Economic Inclusion for Forcibly Displaced Populations

Concerned countries are firmly committed to supporting the inclusion of forcibly displaced populations. This commitment is reflected in clear positions on alternatives to camps, significant financial investments (including in partnership with development actors) in hosting areas, legal frameworks granting access to essential services and employment for forcibly displaced persons on par with host communities, and specific initiatives to facilitate access to land for housing or agriculture.

Despite its complexity, the context offers unique opportunities to advance the inclusion of forcibly displaced populations, reducing dependence on international humanitarian assistance and favoring self-reliance that allows refugees to contribute fully to the local environment and economy. However, hosting contexts face structural constraints in the functioning of basic services and access to economic opportunities—constraints that have been exacerbated by the security and funding crises. These must be considered in the development of inclusion initiatives to ensure alignment with a local development perspective.

UNHCR will:

- Support the elaboration and the implementation of government-led resilience, inclusion or solutions plans/strategies.
- Advocate for the inclusion of the forcibly displaced and the areas that host them, in national and local development plans and budgets.
- Advance the integration of refugees and IDPs in national identity and documentation programmes, to strengthen their inclusion in national statistics, social protection programs, and public policies.
- Strengthen livelihood and economic inclusion opportunities and promote self-reliance, with a particular focus on aligning these efforts with protection interventions—especially those targeting the most vulnerable. Operationalize big-scale initiatives related to agricultural production (e.g. in GRASP in Ghana, AVENIR/AWERIKPA in Togo), increased private sector solutions (UNHCR-IFC Joint Action Plan for the Sahel), camp transformation (Mauritania), and responses addressing the urban dimension of displacement, while supporting local development.

Salmata Ganamé, an internally displaced person in the Northern region, presents part of her harvest from market gardening activities and the production of organic compost set up with the support of UNHCR and its partners. © UNHCR Burkina Faso/ VirginieB.Z

Partnership

Support to national and local authorities. Partnership between UNHCR and the authorities of each country extends from the national to the local level, including within the broader process of decentralizing responsibilities. UNHCR will continue to work closely with national authorities to ensure a response tailored to the specific challenges and priorities of each country, in a spirit of open political and strategic dialogue. All concerned countries have reaffirmed their commitment to the protection of the displaced through regional fora, intergovernmental bodies, and national initiatives. UNHCR will continue to consolidate these gains, anchoring its action in support of governance.

Advancing localization. Over years of crisis, the capacities of national actors have steadily grown—whether through "learning by doing" or targeted capacity-building efforts. Active civil society in all countries – NGOs, community-based groups - have remained on the front lines, working closest to affected populations, despite facing funding and in some cases security, challenges. Localization has always been a key pillar of UNHCR's work in the region. Refugee-, displaced- or women-led organizations have become vital partners in advancing locally owned protection and inclusion responses, ensuring that interventions are shaped by those with lived experience of displacement. This agenda will continue to be pursued with conviction in the coming years including by strengthening synergies between civil society (COBs/RLOs) and other stakeholders.

Strengthening collective efficiency within the UN system. The Sahel Plus context calls for a more coherent and joined-up UN response, in line with the UN80 initiative, aimed at making the UN system more agile, integrated, and effective. UNHCR will support Resident Coordinator Offices and Humanitarian Country Teams, while also strengthening bilateral collaboration with sister UN agencies to identify opportunities for operational complementarity and cost optimization. UNHCR will remain actively engaged in flagship programmes, joint programming with sister agencies, and collective response frameworks (HRP, UNSCDF) led by the UN system in each country.

Building on existing experiences with development partners. Across all countries covered by this strategy, UNHCR (in collaboration with the UN system) and development actors have established both transactional and non-transactional partnerships that are dynamic and aligned with the Humanitarian-Development-Peace (HDP) nexus, inclusion, and solutions agendas. Key partners include the World Bank, the African Development Bank, the European Union and its member states, and the Islamic Development Bank. Renewed approaches with key development actors should also be explored (e.g., innovative financing schemes). Similarly, partnerships with other non-traditional actors will be pursued, especially philanthropic and private-sector actors, such as the partnership with Mastercard Foundation for refugee education, community empowerment and access to livelihood and economic inclusion opportunities. Major past and ongoing, initiatives provide a rich foundation of lessons learned and good practices.

Budget

Oumu Mamane, 15 years, carefully listens to the teacher during the chemistry lesson and takes notes, aiming to study to become a nurse one day. © UNHCR/Antonia Vadala

To effectively respond to the complexity of the situation in the Central Sahel, UNHCR calls for collective support from donors that combines:

- **Flexible funding to ensure responsiveness to emerging operational needs in one or more countries;**
- **Multi-year funding to ensure predictability, which is essential for strengthening resilience and supporting inclusion.**

UNHCR remains fully available to donors to co-design interventions aligned with their strategic priorities and those of the host states receiving forcibly displaced populations.

Country Operations 2026 Budget Needs

COUNTRY	2026 BUDGET
Burkina Faso	99,082,439
Coastal Countries	21,971,055
Mali	90,361,668
Mauritania	36,027,654
Niger	109,055,812
TOTAL	356,498,628

Priority Fundraising Areas in Sahel+ Countries

Our regional strategy prioritizes multi-sectoral interventions that strengthen protection, resilience, and inclusion across the Sahel and coastal states, while addressing urgent gaps and advancing solutions.

Key initiatives include:

- **Scaling up the Route-Based Approach (RBA)** along the West Africa Atlantic Route – a flagship initiative designed to prevent and respond to mixed movements, enhance protection and socio-economic inclusion, and promote safe mobility through a transnational framework bridging humanitarian and development efforts.
- **Regional Protection Programme in the Central Sahel** – addressing violence against women and girls, child protection risks, and gaps in legal documentation, alongside efforts to reinforce national asylum systems through institutional capacity-building and mandate of Refugee Status Determination.
- **Youth Education and Economic Inclusion** – expanding access to education and economic opportunities for young people as part of broader resilience programming.
- **Initiative AVENIR in Gulf of Guinea countries –** delivering inclusive solutions and sustainable livelihoods through large-scale agricultural and resilience programming.

Refugee women and women from the host community in Biankouri, Togo | © UNHCR/Senan Rose Fidelia Bohissou

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