

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)

Committee Overview

Introduction

The Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) is the global organization included in the system of the United Nations (UN) that aims to save lives, protect rights, and build a better and more sustainable future for refugees, people who were forced to flee their home due to conflict or persecution¹. UNHCR, the UN refugee agency, was established in 1950 by the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) to help millions of Europeans who fled from their homes as a consequence of World War II. As the refugee crisis became exaggerated throughout the 20th century, UNGA passed a resolution making the body permanent in 2003.²

While the UNHCR considers the movement of migrants, it is important to distinguish it from the International Organization for Migration (IOM)³ and United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA).⁴ At the end of 2021, 1 of 88 people worldwide, 89.3 million individuals, were forcibly displaced as a result of persecution, conflict, violence, human rights violations, or events seriously disturbing public order.⁵ The number has doubled since 2012, becoming more than 1% of the world's population.⁶ It includes 27.1 million refugees, 53.2 million Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), 4.6 million asylum-seekers, and 5.7 million refugees returned. UNHCR is also mandated to protect and assist those who are stateless, most of whom are not forcibly displaced.⁷

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 UNGA in 1950 with the passing of resolution 428 (V).⁸ The Statute is complemented by subsequent treaties including, most importantly, the *1951 Refugee Convention* and its *1967 Protocol*, as well as regional refugee instruments.

UNHCR reports annually to the UNGA and the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC).⁹ In 2003, the UNGA extended UNHCR's mandate "until the refugee problem is solved." The High Commissioner presents the Refugee Agency's biennial programs and budget, which are approved by UNHCR's Executive Committee (ExCom).¹⁰ The UNHCR 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 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 many partners, ranging from governments to non-governmental entities, such as the private sector and civil society. Most importantly, the UN bodies that the UNHCR works with are the 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 Member States, with 90% of its work done in the field and 10% 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.

Protecting the Rights of Child Refugees

Background:

Out of 103 million forcibly displaced people worldwide in mid-2022, 32.5 million were refugees.¹³ Out of these 32.5 million, 13.7 million refugees and asylum-seekers were children under 18 years old.¹⁴ Between 2018 and 2021, 1.5 million children were born as refugees¹⁵; over the next 25 years, climate change is estimated to put 1.2 billion people at risk of internal and cross-border displacement, a substantial proportion of which is expected to be children.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) ensures that refugee children should enjoy and receive appropriate protection in enjoyment of their rights. It also highlights the importance of family unity and the best interests of the child, emphasizing the need to prioritize the well-being and rights of refugee children in all decisions and actions taken concerning them.¹⁶ UNHCR has developed *A Framework for the Protection of Children* that recognizes UNHCR's expertise in the child sector globally. It articulates six goals, including establishing a safe and healthy environment for refugee children and their development, which encapsulates UNHCR's commitment to protect and realize the rights of children.

UNGA resolution 76/147, *On the Rights of the Child*, underscores the importance of providing equitable support and access to services for marginalized children, including those who are refugees.¹⁷ In 2020, UNHCR and UNICEF established the *Blueprint for Joint Action for Refugee Children*, a commitment to accelerate joint efforts in line with the *Global Compact on Refugees*. It aids host countries in integrating refugee children into their national development plans and budgets while enhancing national service delivery systems focusing on ensuring access to education, child protection services, clean water, and hygiene facilities for both refugee and host community children.

Climate-Induced Displacement of Children.

Over 70% of the world's refugees and internally displaced people come from the most climate-vulnerable countries.¹⁸ *The Global Compact on Refugees* directly addresses the growing concern of climate change. It recognizes that "climate, environmental degradation and disasters increasingly interact with the drivers of refugee movements".¹⁹ Marginalized or vulnerable segments of the population, due to factors such as geography, gender, sexual orientation, age, indigenous or minority status, disability, or living in situations of conflict, violence, or displacement, experience the impacts of climate change in an unequal and disproportionate

manner.²⁰ About half of the world's children, an estimated 1 billion, live in Member States highly vulnerable to climate change. Additionally, there is a record-breaking number of 36.5 million children displaced from their homes; across 15 Member States affected by crises, 8 million children under the age of 5 face the threat of severe malnutrition and potential mortality due to drought and climate-related concerns.²¹ Climate-related disasters such as flooding and desertification can trigger mass displacement due to the threat of lack of food or inadequate housing.

Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 13 - Climate Action - calls for urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts. *The Paris Agreement* recognizes the impacts of climate change on vulnerable populations, including refugees and displaced persons. Although the agreement does not specifically address the issue of refugees, it acknowledges the need to strengthen the global response to climate-induced displacement. In 2020, UNHCR released *Legal Considerations* as a reference to provide guidance and shape international discourse regarding claims related to displacement in the context of disasters and climate change.²² Regardless, UNHCR does not endorse the term "climate refugee" and instead advocates for the more precise terminology of "persons displaced in the context of disasters and climate change."²³

UNHCR is actively delivering protection and aid to numerous refugees and individuals displaced due to the repercussions of climate change. Moreover, it is actively engaged in enhancing their capacity to withstand future disasters and build resilience. UNHCR's *Strategic Framework for Climate Action* outlines the guidelines for UNHCR's response to the escalating global climate emergency. It establishes a unified structure and methodology to enhance its own environmental commitment in three essential areas of action: law and policy, operations, and environmental sustainability within the organization, known as "greening" UNHCR.²⁴

UNHCR has enhanced its role in awareness campaigns about climate change as a threat that leads to displacement, collaborating with UN bodies such as UNDP, UNICEF, IOM, the United Nation's Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), and other key partners. UNHCR supports and participates in *The Nansen Initiative Protection Agenda*. It provides technical expertise, guidance, and assistance throughout the process. UNHCR's involvement helped ensure that the protection needs of cross-border displaced persons were effectively addressed within the *Nansen Initiative's* framework. In 2015, the UNHRC became an invitee to the *Platform on Disaster Displacement (PDD)*, a group of Member States that collaborated to address people displaced across borders in the context of climate change and climate disasters. It aims to build strong partnerships and institute multi-stakeholder dialogue for information-sharing and policy development.²⁵ In 2021, UNHCR developed *Operational Strategy for Climate Resilience and Environmental Sustainability 2022-2025* that aims to improve the predictability of the UN Refugee Agency's engagement in responding to emergencies as a result of climate-related and other natural hazards.²⁶

To prevent climate displacement, UNHCR works with the *Sahel Predictive Analytics* project focusing on Mauritania, Niger, and Nigeria to identify protection gaps faced by communities affected by climate change and migration, and improve the capacity of local, national, and regional stakeholders to define measures that will protect migrants', including refugees', rights.

Education

Millions of refugee children are being denied access to the entire spectrum of education, ranging from pre-primary to higher education. Moreover, the Member States hosting these children are already grappling with challenges in providing high-quality education, as well as other essential public services.²⁷ In 2018, 33% of refugees lived in camps and 49% lived in private accommodations, participating in learning activities that were not tied to the national educational system, which posed challenges to ensuring access to high-quality education.²⁸ During the 2020-2021 academic year, the average gross enrollment rates for elementary school remained relatively stable at 68%, similar to the previous year. However, the situation is notably different for high school, where the enrollment rate drops significantly to 37%. This indicates that the older a refugee child is, the less likely they are to be enrolled in school.²⁹

The specific targets of SDG 4 – Education - contribute directly to achieving the overarching goal. SDG target 4.1 outlines 2030 as the goal by which all girls and boys should have completely free, equitable, and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes. The right of refugees to education in host states was guaranteed in the 1951 *UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees* and the 1967 *Protocol*. The 146 parties to the convention and 147 parties to the protocol committed to refugees receiving ‘the same treatment as is accorded to nationals with respect to elementary education,’ and ‘treatment as favorable as possible, and, in any event, not less favorable than that accorded to aliens in the same circumstances with respect to education other than elementary education.’³⁰

The Education 2030 Incheon Declaration and Framework for Action emphasizes the importance of education as a fundamental human right and a catalyst for sustainable development. It raises a concern about a substantial proportion of the worldwide population, including refugees and IDPs, that stay in an out-of-school cycle due to armed conflicts and pandemics, which continue to disrupt access to education.³¹ The *Framework* calls for instituting responsive and resilient education systems to meet the needs of children deprived of access to education. It encourages Member States to develop and implement policies and practices that support the integration of refugee children into national education systems. This includes addressing the barriers that refugee children may face in accessing education, such as discrimination, language barriers, lack of documentation, and limited resources.³²

The 2018 Global Compact on Refugees places tackling education challenges in the center of the international refugee agenda, meeting the need to benefit both refugees and host states. It seeks to build an efficient international system; when some governments and host communities open their schools to welcome refugees, other stakeholders provide predictable financing, resources, and support to establish resilient and sustainable education systems.³³

To address refugee children's education issues, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and UNICEF, together with Plan International and other NGOs, launched a joint campaign known as "*Education without limits: I learn here or there.*" This initiative highlights the need to provide children, teachers, and host communities with resources, mechanisms, and protocols in a situation of mobility to keep children in school and to show how their access to education can make a positive impact on host communities.³⁴

Health

Refugees have the right to live healthy lives. Refugees remain among the most vulnerable members of society, facing inadequate access to health services, including treatment of physical and mental health problems, a situation shaped by their travel experience and host country conditions. In 2021, only 3.25 million refugees out of 89.3 million were able to access COVID-19 vaccinations.³⁵ Stunting amongst children up to 5 years old remains a concern in refugee sites in most host states;³⁶ 96% of sites had serious levels of anemia due to extreme malnutrition.³⁷

Together, the *CRC* and child rights principles establish the structure and function of a Child Rights-Based approach (CRBA) to child health, appropriate nutrition and well-being—that provides the strategies and tools to transform child health practices into children's rights. UNHCR aims to ensure healthy lives and promote wellbeing, enabling children's access to safe, effective, equitable, and affordable health care services. UNHCR leads the *Global Protection Cluster (GPC)*, a network of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), international organizations, and UN agencies engaged in protection work in humanitarian crises, including armed conflict, climate change-induced events, and natural disasters.³⁸ *The Public Health Strategy 2021-2025* advocates for the right to health and emphasizes the significance of public health in both preparedness for and response to refugee emergencies. *GPC* is mandated by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC), and is co-directed by UNHCR. In 2021, UNHCR resumed monitoring of the nutrition situation through *the Standardized Expanded Nutrition Surveys (SENS)*, which had been paused due to COVID-19 restrictions in 2020.³⁹

Together with the *GHC*, *GPC* developed *The Health and Protection: Joint Operational Framework (JOF)* that guarantees that the health and protection response during humanitarian emergencies can adjust to diverse environments and is well-coordinated, ensuring the provision of high-quality services that address the specific needs of affected individuals and vulnerable groups based on their situation or vulnerabilities. UNHCR and its partners use various methods to assess refugee access to services. One of the key tools is the *Integrated Refugee Health Information System (iRHIS)*. The *iRHIS* collects and analyzes a wide range of health and nutrition data, enabling the visualization of trends over time. The *iRHIS* data encompasses 155 sites across 22 states, encompassing a refugee population of over 5 million, with a particular emphasis on the importance of women and children's well-being.⁴⁰

As the leading UN organizations working for refugees and for children, UNHCR and UNICEF have established a *Strategic Collaboration Framework* to advance the vision of ensuring the safety of refugee children from physical harm and exploitation within clean and hygienic living environments. The *Framework's* approach is to enable refugees to benefit from national services and include them in national development plans, which is consistent with the pledge to “leave no one behind” in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.⁴¹

Conclusion

UNHCR protects refugees, asylum-seekers, people displaced within their own country and stateless persons. Over half of the world's refugees are children, and many of them will spend their entire childhood away from their states of origin, often separated from their families. Refugee

children, sometimes unaccompanied, need protection because they are at more than double the risk for violence, exploitation, and abuse. In collaboration with national authorities, international organizations, and local partners, UNHCR supports, protects, and seeks solutions for displaced children. Its focus lies in providing care and assistance to unaccompanied or separated children, as well as facilitating family tracing and reunification services. UNHCR also prioritizes registering newborns and providing support to children with disabilities. Through the implementation of psychosocial support programs and educational initiatives, it aims to aid children in rebuilding their lives.

Questions to Consider

1. What relations can the UNHCR and its partners form with national authorities and interregional organizations in order to promote the hosting of refugees?
2. What additional areas can the UNHCR highlight surrounding the rights of children to help them access social protections?
3. What threats do migrant children face that the UNHCR may have the abilities to help alleviate?
4. What options may exist through the UNHCR and its partners to help refugee students access education and social benefits abroad?
5. How can child refugees be protected from discrimination? What can be done to promote their social inclusion and integration into their host communities?

Helpful Links

1. <https://maps.worldbank.org/projects>
2. <https://www.unhcr.org/globaltrends/>
3. <https://globalcompactrefugees.org>
4. <https://www.unhcr.org/children.html>
5. <https://www.unicef.org/topics/child-refugees>
6. <https://www.iom.int/child-trafficking-and-exploitation>
7. <https://www.hrw.org/topic/childrens-rights/child-refugees>