

Engaging development actors in supporting the socio-economic integration of forcibly displaced persons in Southern Africa

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UNHCR in Southern Africa has been collaborating with development actors to support the socio-economic integration and durable solutions for displaced people in the region. Various considerations and lessons emerge from this work to date.

Since 2019, UNHCR's Regional Bureau for Southern Africa has been working with development actors across Southern Africa to build long-term support for the socio-economic integration of forcibly displaced persons. During this time, UNHCR has engaged development partners such as the World Bank, the African Development Bank (AfDB), the EU's Department for International Partnerships, the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development and the Japan International Cooperation Agency. UNHCR's role has mainly been as a facilitator and a catalyst for the engagement of other actors. Five lessons have emerged from this work, namely: an enabling policy environment, advocacy on inclusion, unlocking private sector investments, access to sustainable energy solutions for displaced people, and the development of data and a robust evidence base.

Policy environment

First and foremost, there needs to be an enabling policy environment that supports refugee self-reliance. Self-reliance cannot occur without provision for the fundamental rights of refugees. The tracking done by UNHCR of movements of registered asylum seekers and refugees in Southern Africa has shown that these movements are triggered by several factors, including lack of access to employment and livelihoods due to restrictions imposed by some countries. In the region, 11 countries have made reservations to the 1951 Geneva Convention which impact fundamental rights of refugees, including access to employment, labour rights, education, freedom of movement, property rights, and right of association. Advocacy is needed to ensure the lifting of

these reservations, some of which are being reconsidered by several countries in the region, as reflected in policy commitments made at the 2019 Global Refugee Forum.

UNHCR's progress towards socio-economic integration in Southern Africa has been largely thanks to a strong, supportive and enabling environment. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and the Republic of the Congo, UNHCR has engaged with the World Bank through the Refugee Policy Review Framework to systematically review refugee policies and the regulatory environment, including looking at access to national systems and economic opportunities, and from a gender perspective. These assessments have provided opportunities for development actors to engage in policy dialogue with the two countries to advocate for more favourable policies, regulatory environment, rights and recognitions that ensure durable solutions, including self-reliance for refugees and adequate support to their communities. In Mozambique, the government has expressed explicit interest in the local integration of refugees, which has provided the necessary goodwill and political buy-in for the expansion of development programmes to support refugees and their host communities.

Advocacy and dialogue

Secondly, it is crucial for development actors to advocate with host governments and other stakeholders for the inclusion of forcibly displaced persons in government systems and in development plans and projects. This advocacy lends a stronger voice to calls for the inclusion of forcibly displaced persons. For example, in the DRC, mobilisation of World Bank funding through the IDA18 Refugee Sub-Window for

Refugees and Host Communities and the IDA19 Window for Host Communities and Refugees, as well as political advocacy on inclusion, has been essential to expand social protection systems to include forcibly displaced persons. In the Republic of the Congo, World Bank financing through the Refugee Sub-Window has helped to increase the size of the national social registry in Likouala to include both refugee and host community households. With 76% of refugees globally living in situations of protracted displacement and less than 1% realising a durable solution in the short term, inclusion in strategic government systems such as social protection represents a pragmatic way to bridge emergency assistance and progress towards durable solutions.¹

Private sector involvement

Thirdly, the involvement of the private sector is extremely important. The private sector can promote refugee entrepreneurship, which creates a sustainable source of income, supports additional investments, creates jobs and provides products and services relevant to the needs of refugees and their host communities – all of which are crucial to socio-economic integration. However, a significant barrier to private sector development in refugee-hosting areas in Southern Africa is the lack of familiarity that the sector has with operating within refugee communities. The private sector still lacks information on business opportunities in areas affected by forced displacement. For example, it tends to be assumed that refugees are in host countries temporarily, are dependent on aid, and lack financial or other assets. The reality, however, is that many refugees worldwide are in a protracted situation, for five or more years in their country of asylum.² UNHCR is therefore exploring partnerships with development actors that address the specific challenges to private sector engagement in refugee-hosting areas.

In Mozambique, for instance, UNHCR works with the AfDB to catalyse the growth of small enterprises by facilitating displaced people's access to finance, providing entrepreneurial skills development, ensuring quality inputs, reducing post-harvest losses, and facilitating access to markets. In the DRC, UNHCR is also

working with the AfDB to create a conducive environment to support private sector development and enhance socio-economic inclusion in the Grand Kasai and other areas hosting forcibly displaced persons.

Access to energy

Fourthly, in addition to being an important objective in itself, access to energy is a critical bridge between short-term humanitarian responses and longer-term development goals. It is also a catalyst for social cohesion and socio-economic integration. Sustainable energy access is a key factor in achieving 125 of all 169 targets of the Sustainable Development Goals.³ However, displaced people are rarely included in national or international policies relating to energy access. Furthermore, due to competing demands, energy is not always prioritised in humanitarian assistance, which takes a severe financial and ecological toll on refugees and host communities. In Southern Africa, most displaced populations have limited or no access to electricity and a majority of those living in camps burn biomass such as firewood for cooking. This creates competition for finite natural resources, which often triggers tension between refugees and host communities, hindering integration. It also negatively impacts local ecosystems, upon which forcibly displaced persons and their hosts often rely for their livelihoods.

Development investments can be useful in removing the commercial barriers to entry for the private sector in order to facilitate access to energy in displacement settings. In Mozambique, for instance, the AfDB funded the Mozambique Energy for All Project to increase the number of electricity connections within the country, including in refugee and IDP settlement areas, and directly address the affordability barriers for energy provision for vulnerable groups. Provision of clean, sustainable, reliable energy should provide significant benefits relating to protection, gender equality, food security, water, sanitation, health, opportunities for income-generating activities, education, livelihoods and environmental protection. However, while this project addresses the supply side of energy provision, complementary measures are needed to increase the

economic empowerment and self-reliance of the end users, for them to be able to afford energy access and use. This could be in the form of loan guarantees, investment in livelihood interventions, pay-as-you-go models for renewable energy solutions, and microfinancing.

Evidence base

Finally, we need to improve the evidence base for what works and what does not work in designing effective, durable solutions to forced displacement. Empirical, analytical evidence on best practices in strengthening the socio-economic integration of refugees in the region is a critical tool, but is currently limited.

UNHCR has evaluated its engagement with humanitarian and development actors since 2019 and is now implementing the evaluation recommendations and seeking to generate new learnings from successful cases of refugee inclusion. To improve the availability of data in the DRC, the World Bank-UNHCR Joint Data Center on Forced Displacement is financing a socio-economic survey of internally displaced persons in the Grand Kasai, to inform future programming for government, development and humanitarian actors. In the Republic of the Congo, the Center is also financing an evaluation to assess the impact of the inclusion of refugees and asylum seekers in the national Lisungi Safety Nets Programme, in order to generate data on best practices on the inclusion of forcibly displaced persons in national social protection systems.

Additional roles and contributions

It would be remiss to talk about the socio-economic integration of forcibly displaced persons in Southern Africa without mentioning the significant role of regional economic communities. UNHCR's cooperation with the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) cuts across areas including: disaster management, mitigation and response; regional mechanisms governing freedom of movement, regularisation of stay, access to work rights for refugees; and alternative pathways for skilled migrants. SADC Member States and UNHCR have signed a Memorandum of Understanding that commits Member States to address the social,

economic and political issues in the region that affect the root causes of forced displacement, refugee protection, provision of humanitarian assistance and the search for durable solutions, including socio-economic integration.

In addition, many development actors have adapted their work to develop policies and tools that support long-term, comprehensive solutions to the forced displacement crisis. The World Bank's Fragility, Conflict, and Violence (FCV) strategy (2020-2025) is enhancing its effectiveness in supporting countries to address the drivers and impacts of FCV and to strengthen resilience, especially for the most vulnerable populations. The AfDB's Strategy on Addressing Fragility and Building Resilience in Africa (2022-2027) places the Bank at the centre of Africa's efforts to address fragility and pave the way towards resilient and inclusive development. The International Finance Corporation is also leveraging its unique comparative advantage to identify private sector solutions and opportunities for refugees and their host communities. Within UNHCR, there has also been an institutional shift towards supporting a whole-of-society approach and increasing engagement with development actors to support durable solutions for displaced people.

Building effective synergies between humanitarian and development actors takes time and effort. This is because the mandates of humanitarian and development actors often differ, as do their budget cycles, instruments, technical jargon, internal processes, speed of operating and business cultures. Nonetheless, these partnerships are crucial to supporting long-term durable solutions, including the socio-economic integration of forcibly displaced persons.

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The views expressed here are personal and do not represent the official position of UNHCR.

1. UNHCR (2021) *Inclusion of Refugees in Government Social Protection Systems in Africa* bit.ly/UNHCR-government-social-protection
2. Devictor Xavier (2019) *How long do refugees stay in exile? To find out, beware of averages* bit.ly/World-Bank-refugee-exile
3. UNHCR and UNITAR (2020) *Sustainable energy, displacement and climate resilience* bit.ly/energy-displacement-resilience