



**UNHCR**  
The UN Refugee Agency

# DATA TRANSFORMATION STRATEGY 2020-2025

## Supporting protection and solutions

September 2019

## Contents

I. Introduction	3
II. What we aim to achieve	4
III. Our Principles	6
IV. Why invest now in data and information management?	8
V. Defining UNHCR's role in data and information	10
VI. Defining our approach	14
VII. Priority Actions	16

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# I. Introduction

Data on forcibly displaced and stateless populations is critical to inform the international agenda and political debates on forced displacement and related issues, and to guide strategy development, policy-making and programming choices at the global, regional and national levels. Many humanitarian and development agencies recognize the importance of data on forcibly displaced populations and statelessness, and in the context of Agenda 2030, have made efforts to collect, collate and analyse such information.

**As the UN Agency with a responsibility to protect and assist asylum-seekers, refugees, internally displaced persons (IDPs), returnees and stateless people**, UNHCR has a vital role to play in generating and using information on forced displacement and statelessness. Such information can save lives, safeguard rights and well-being, and contribute to resilience and long-term solutions. With quality and timely data, UNHCR and its partners can inspire confidence and trust, take decisions informed by evidence, make resource allocations more effectively, inform communications and advocacy, and demonstrate accountability.

UNHCR currently generates and uses various types of data and information on forced displacement and statelessness situations, on affected populations, and on its response. Increasingly, UNHCR's approach to strengthen data and information systems is based on collaboration, collective efforts and joint engagement with partners and stakeholders, as the optimal way to both ensure the effective use of resources and to achieve outcomes for those affected by forced displacement. UNHCR's data transformation strategy presents a vision, strategic priorities and key actions that will be undertaken to enhance strategic and responsible use of timely, quality data and information in line with this future approach.



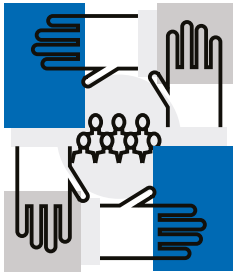
*Biometric data is being collected from recently arrived South Sudanese refugees during a registration process at Imvepi reception center in Arua district in Northern Uganda near South Sudan 1 May, 2017. © UNHCR/Jiro Ose*

## II. What we aim to achieve

**Our vision is that by 2025, UNHCR is a trusted leader on data and information related to refugees and other affected populations, thereby enabling actions that protect, include and empower.**



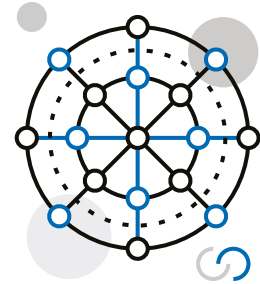
*A Malian woman goes through the biometric screening procedure at a distribution centre in Mbera camp, part of the monthly food and cash distribution. © UNHCR/Viola E. Bruttomesso*



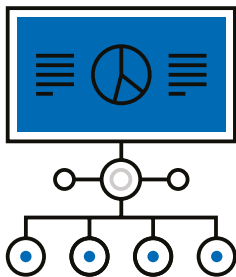
Our data investments are **driven by our mission to protect and seek solutions for refugees and other forcibly displaced**. UNHCR measures and adapts its data management and aims to be accountable to affected populations, donors, and other stakeholders.



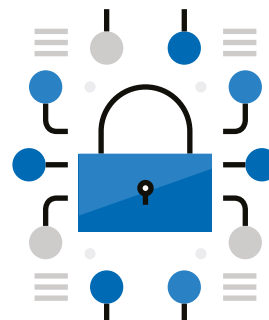
Our systems **leverage and adapt technology** in how data is collected, shared, stored, analysed, protected and used. Recognising the variation in operational contexts, our systems will have options and alternatives that **work in low-resource and low-technology settings**.



Our data strategy is geared towards **connecting knowledge and learning across the organization**. We **balance the need for centralized data management** standards, systems, processes, and tools with the requirement to enable innovation at the regional and local level and to **be responsive and adaptive to different needs**.



Our data strategy will ensure we are **outward-facing, collaborative and transparent**. Our **data ecosystem will communicate with and offer value to other systems** such as those developed by governments, the World Bank, partner platforms, and UN agencies.



Our data strategy will enable us to lead globally **on data protection, security and data ethics**, and will ensure that all persons of concern have access to their data and other information to make decisions about their lives.

## III. Our Principles



*UNHCR staff member receives refugees on 7 May during a food distribution at South Sudan's Gorom refugee camp. © UNHCR/Elizabeth Stuart*

**UNHCR data and information activities will be guided by core principles** that are applicable regardless of the type, context, or purpose. Anchored in the overall imperative of “Do no harm”, these principles will ensure that our activities are consistent with responsible and ethical approaches to data management in humanitarian contexts.

## People Centred

UNHCR data and information activities will be guided by the interests and rights of the people we seek to serve and the communities around them. Activities will be conducted in an objective, impartial and transparent manner. Affected populations will be included and meaningfully engaged whenever possible, in accordance with our accountability and commitment to them.

## Purpose and proportion

UNHCR data and information activities will serve specific information needs and defined purposes in order to avoid unnecessary burdens on and potential harm to both those who provide data and those who manage it.

The purposes will be specific and clearly defined as well as proportional to the expected benefits, risks and costs associated with protection and solutions.

## Data protection and security

The UN's Personal Data Protection and Privacy principles and UNHCR's Data Protection Policy inform all processing of personal data. Moreover, UNHCR data and information activities will adhere to high international information and cybersecurity standards, including the concept of privacy, by design and by default.



*UNHCR staff member uses an iris scanner on a refugee's eye to confirm identification at South Sudan's Gorum refugee camp.*  
© UNHCR/Elizabeth Stuart

## IV. Why invest now in data and information management?

There are **eight** critical developments that will affect UNHCR's protection and delivery of assistance significantly in the coming 5 to 10 years. All require UNHCR, and others, to consider needs and opportunities for data and information differently in the coming years.

First, there is growing recognition that **the achievement of the UN Sustainable Development Goals is contingent on the extent to which those forcibly displaced are included and empowered in the coming years.** Two billion people live in countries where development outcomes are affected by fragility, conflict and violence. At the end of 2018, 70.8 million people were forcibly displaced from their homes; nearly 25.9 million were refugees. Reliable, up-to-date facts and figures about protection contexts, vulnerabilities and needs will drive targeted policies and actions.

Second, in this context, the Global Compact on Refugees guides the international community by mobilizing political will, broadening the support base and activating arrangements for more equitable and predictable burden- and responsibility-sharing. **Timely and accurate information on the indicators and measures of success of the global compact will be a critical element in ensuring such support.**

Third, a data revolution is taking place around the world, and many within the UN system see **data as a game-changer for informing policy and practice. UNHCR's contributions will generate better and more powerful data and evidence on the**

**circumstances of forcibly displaced populations.**

Achieving this role is dependent on boosting data collection, management and analytical capacities.

As an example, the partnership with the World Bank on the Joint Data Centre on Forced Displacement is a step in the right direction. The Joint Data Centre aims to support collective, sustainable efforts to ensure that socioeconomic data on forcibly displaced populations are systematically collected, analysed, and made available to interested stakeholders through secure and open access. The Joint Data Centre will influence, complement and reinforce UNHCR's own data and information management systems for better data and evidence.

Fourth, **global trends around the collection and use of personally identifiable information, biometrics and the emerging ethical issues** pose risks to UNHCR and most importantly, the individuals and families that UNHCR serves. UNHCR has unique experience with personal data, particularly of refugees, and is well placed to leverage advances in technology to develop more sophisticated systems that will protect identities and ensure the security and integrity of personal data.

Fifth, **governments are seeking greater accountability and transparency on the impact, results, and appropriate and prudent use of humanitarian and development financing.** UNHCR's authority and influence rest heavily on its ability to show results and efficiencies, as well as gaps in implementation and coverage. Better data will ensure ongoing support and



finance in line with Grand Bargain commitments. External benchmarking shows that others have already made investments in many of these areas.

Sixth, the UN Secretary General has embarked on an ambitious set of reforms to align the UN development system with the 2030 Agenda. **In particular, the Common Country Analysis, the Cooperation Framework and the Joint Workplan will require stronger partnerships for data and information, joint needs assessments, and shared platforms for reporting.**

Seventh, UNHCR recently issued the Internally Displaced Population Policy and Guidance Package to strengthen UNHCR’s commitments to IDPs. The policy outlines the data needs, systems and methods associated with IDPs and describes how, in line with its role in managing evidence and information, **UNHCR aims to invest in data on internally and forcibly displaced populations.**

Eighth, the timeframe of this strategy encompasses the remaining years of the Global Action Plan to End Statelessness 2014–2024 (GAP). One of the key actions in the GAP is to **improve quantitative and qualitative data on stateless populations.** As gathering data continues to be a major challenge to resolving statelessness, stepping up efforts through the analysis of civil registration data, population censuses, targeted surveys and studies is key to reaching the GAP goal and will be pursued as part of the strategy.



UNHCR staff member punches a card that records food distributions in South Sudan’s Gorom refugee camp. © UNHCR/Elizabeth Stuart

## V. Defining UNHCR's role in data and information

UNHCR works globally with refugees and asylum seekers, stateless persons, returnees and internally displaced persons. To protect and assist these population groups, UNHCR needs to access a complex range of different types of data and information:

- The humanitarian situation and the wider environment (including social, economic, political, legal and policy);
- The people affected by the situation (notably population data about their number, location, and profile, including specific vulnerabilities and needs); and
- Operational information on delivery of protection and assistance of a given response to the situation.

These different types of data must be collected by UNHCR or by others, analysed, and presented in a timely manner in order to manage resources, respond effectively, and advocate for affected populations. UNHCR and its partners already collect and use a significant amount of data, and there are currently some systems to manage and analyse this information for decision-makers and staff at all levels. While these efforts have created a data-rich environment, there is room to improve how data is integrated and pulled together, its quality and integrity, and consistency and efficiency.

In the coming years, UNHCR aims to enhance and transform its data and information management to become more effective at interrogating and analysing a wider range of evidence for planning, monitoring, advocacy, learning, course correction, reporting and external communications. Part of this ambition means recognising where UNHCR needs to collect data itself, and where it can use data collected by others, how and what data to share with others to help build a common understanding of protection needs, risks and capacities of refugees and other affected populations, and ultimately to demonstrate results.



Government



Partner



UNHCR



UN Agencies

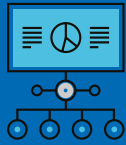


Open Data

Data Sources  
UNHCR Uses



Identity & Case  
Management



Activity &  
Results Data



Assessment &  
Sectoral  
Monitoring



Demographic &  
Socioeconomic  
Data

Operational Data  
UNHCR Uses



Finance



Supply Chain



HR

Administrative Data  
UNHCR Uses

UNHCR has several current and emerging assets in data collection and analysis, which it can leverage in this data transformation:

**UNHCR's work on international protection and durable solutions for a wide range of population groups affected by humanitarian crises and stateless persons**

UNHCR is obligated to report on the status and protection conditions of refugees and stateless persons. We have also been responding to the needs of IDPs for many decades, notably as a result of the UN Humanitarian Reform (2005) and the Inter-Agency Standing Committee Transformative Agenda (2011).

**Deep relationships and trust with refugees and other persons of concern**

Persons of concern trust UNHCR to responsibly and purposefully manage personal and/or sensitive information concerning individual experiences and situations. This provides UNHCR with legitimacy in influencing the international response from governments and the public.

**Global impartial humanitarian agency and deep field presence**

As of August 2019, UNHCR was working in 130 countries across 478 locations involving 72<sup>1</sup> operations. Our humanitarian values and response capacity enable us to reach a variety of persons in different contexts. UNHCR can provide global, regional and country situation analysis for more effective responses, particularly in hard-to-reach areas.

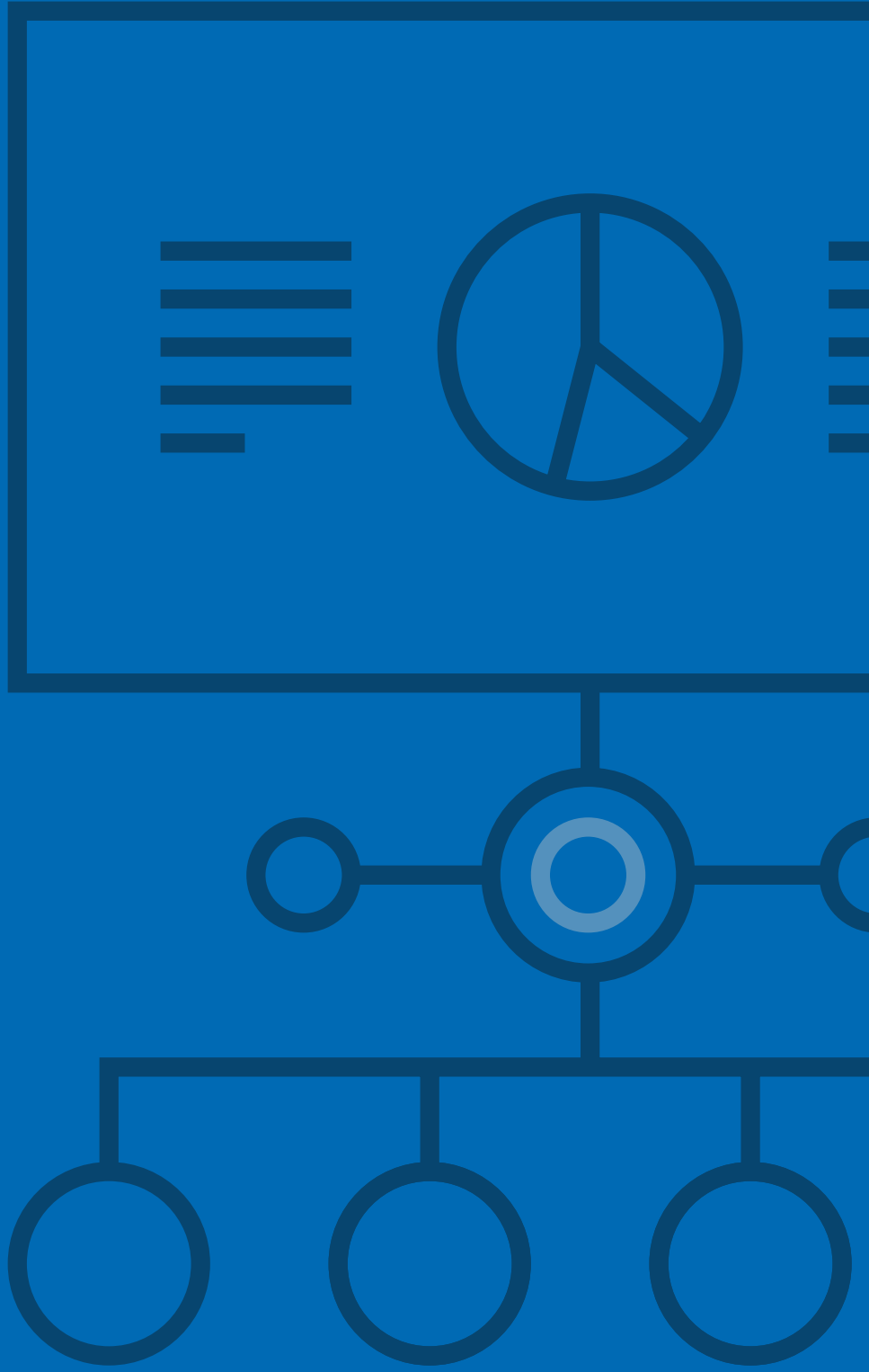
**Close relationships with governments and other stakeholders**

UNHCR has invested in building collaborative relationships with governments, recognising and supporting them as primary duty bearers. UNHCR will continue to strengthen these relationships which allow access to locations and delivery of assistance and services to persons of concern and to work with governments to improve the quality and availability of data and information.

**Experience with and access to identity management of forcibly displaced populations**

UNHCR's experience with registration and broader identity management enables us to understand vulnerabilities, target assistance and undertake case management, a unique aspect of our work.

<sup>1</sup> UNHCR, *Global Focus*, <http://reporting.unhcr.org/operations>



## VI. Defining our approach

Achieving the vision described above will require UNHCR to invest in data and information management. The trends and shifts in context create an urgency to build a mature data and information ecosystem within UNHCR, for itself and other stakeholders; **status quo is not an option**. At the same time, UNHCR is well-positioned to make these investments, yielding some quick results as well as long-term benefits.

UNHCR's approach to data transformation is designed to: **maximise the value of our data and information** by getting the best quality data that we can, by focusing data collection on information that is useful and useable, whether collected by us or others, and by making the most of the data we have to inform policy and programming; **enhance data literacy** by making sure that our people have the knowledge and skills to use data responsibly and effectively; and **make a positive contribution** by using and managing our data in planning and monitoring our work for refugees and other affected populations and communicating our results. The data transformation is taking place concurrently with UNHCR's regionalization efforts and implementation of the strategy reflects this new structure.

More specifically, UNHCR will make investments to adapt to the evolving data landscape. The data transformation strategy outlines that current data management systems will be more inter-operable; that a corporate data governance framework will be established to provide secure processes for data sharing and transfer; and to support better use of qualitative, quantitative and participatory data throughout the programme cycle.

UNHCR also must ensure that individuals and communities have the data and information needed to enhance their own protection, meet their own needs and identify their own solutions. The fast-changing digital identity landscape calls for new frameworks that facilitate the flow and use of data while also ensuring the right to privacy and data protection.

### How the data strategy links with UNHCR's Results-Based Management (RBM) System

UNHCR's RBM system, Results Framework, processes and associated indicators are currently being redesigned. The new framework will establish a limited set of core outcome and impact indicators that enable aggregated global analysis and reporting.

The new structure will also enable linkages to SDGs where appropriate. Furthermore, there will be flexibility at the country operation level to enable for context specificity and linkages with UN-wide efforts as relevant. Finally, sectors will provide guidance on best practices in indicator selection and use to country operations.

Providing norms, standards and policies that guide how data is collected, stored, protected and shared against these core indicators is part and parcel of the data strategy.

The RBM team and the HQ data service will work closely to develop and disseminate guidance and tools on data collection and systems for storage and sharing in collaboration with technical teams at bureaux/headquarters for use by regional data platforms and country operations.

## Trusted, valid, reliable and useful data and information on persons of concern

### What success will look like:

UNHCR is able to provide reliable statistics and produce or access reliable, timely and accurate data and information on refugees and other persons of concern, including on predictive population movements.

UNHCR and stakeholders (including partners, member states and donors) use evidence to make strategic decisions, inform actions and plans.

Anonymised socioeconomic data collected or used by the Joint Data Centre is trusted and utilised by a wide array of stakeholders in support of protection and solutions for persons of concern.

1

## Coherent, systematic, responsible, efficient data management

### What success will look like:

UNHCR ensures that quality and coherent data related to refugees and other persons of concern is systematically, responsibly and efficiently managed by UNHCR and its partners, and shared openly and responsibly both internally and externally.

This will entail that data is collated, collected, processed, protected, analysed, stored, shared and used according to organizational norms and conventions and through well-developed and functional systems and processes.

Capacities of staff and partners to oversee data collection and quality, data protection and data analysis are robust. Roles, responsibilities and authorities of staff engaged in data management in headquarters, regions and countries are clear.

2

## Clear and quality evidence on results and impact of UNHCR interventions

### What success will look like:

UNHCR has country, regional and global analytics and reports that are regularly generated on results and collective impact, and are linked with budget, expenditure and staffing data.

Data is useful to UNHCR and partners to raise funds, be accountable and show the impact of efforts to respond to current and emerging needs of persons of concern.

3

## Member States, implementing and operational partners look to us for guidance on ethical and responsible approaches to data protection and security:

### What success will look like:

UNHCR demonstrates global leadership and builds capacities and standard protocols on issues of ethical and responsible data approaches, inclusion in digital systems, and identity management, in ways that protect and empower persons of concern.

Guidance, including policies and protocols on how personal data is processed, including micro-data, is uniformly applied throughout the organization, and increasingly used by all Member States and implementing partners.

Refugees and other persons of concern have increased access to ownership and agency over their personal data.

4

# VII. Priority Actions

**UNHCR will invest in four complementary priority areas** that will be implemented across the organization in the coming five years in a sequenced manner to achieve the vision and strategic outcomes.

## A. Investing in Data Management and Governance

Effective data management in UNHCR will only be possible through adherence to norms and policies, disciplined data management and sound data and information sharing practices.

Rules, norms and practices to govern and align UNHCR's data and information systems are crucial to ensure that headquarters, regional and country data systems are effective, consistent and systematic, and are prerequisites for global aggregation.

## B. Investments in Information Systems

Based on a corporate set of norms and standards for data management and a data governance structure, there will be a need for further investments in information systems and processes that enable UNHCR to efficiently and systematically capture, use, share and highlight quality data at all levels.

These investments should be made leveraging the technology and data trends to ensure data protection and security, data quality and consistency, as well as inter-operability and mutual data transfer with external systems. Some investments that are unique to refugee and stateless populations are needed, while others will be unique to IDP situations.

## C. Investing in Capacities

Capacity investments include recruitment of new and additional expertise in the area of data science and analytics; reskilling of existing staff working on data and information; and general capacity-building among all managers on data interpretation and use.

## D. Investing in Culture

Culture is the hardest one to evolve, as it requires staff to become familiar with using data in their day-to-day work for partner management, decision-making, communication and planning.

One example of introducing a change in culture is the use of data-informed decision-making by senior management in formal communications and staff meetings. Senior managers can also set expectations for staff to present data on a regular basis that helps to inform operational performance tracking, planning and targeting of assistance.





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