UNHCR operations plan in emergencies

11 September 2023

Key points

- The UNHCR office should appoint a broadly composed multi-functional planning team of UNHCR staff at the start of an emergency, to draft UNHCR’s initial Plan and amend it as the situation evolves.

- Keep the results chain simple. Focus on key results the operation expects to achieve. Remember that each indicator must have a monitoring plan and a data collection mechanism. Prefer strong data and few indicators (quality rather than quantity).

- Initially, operations are advised to draft the Plan ‘off-line’, before recording and proceeding to detailed budgeting.

- Internal UNHCR planning requirements should not drive the external planning process, which needs to take a broader, inclusive approach. Do not underestimate the importance of inter-agency planning.

- Pay attention to the timelines of internal and external processes that are relevant to the management of an emergency operation (such as inter-agency planning documents, internal requests for additional resources, UNHCR and inter-agency appeals). Try to achieve logical sequencing.

- The Plan should be a living document that is updated after major developments or decisions.

- Whenever an Operating level or Operation Plan increases, or project partnership agreements are signed or revised, update the indicator targets (for both impact and performance). Periodically review the results chain and associated budgets to ensure they remain consistent: this will help you track and report achievements. All elements of the results chain, and narratives with respect to objectives, should be completed and recorded in Focus by the end of the calendar year.

- Operations are advised to develop a basic results chain to inform the logframes of project partnership agreements and their budgets. If it becomes necessary to create new objectives, outputs, or indicators, they should be recorded in Focus because these are essential elements of the Plan.

- Review and update the Budget Control Plan (BCP) form for your operation, so that staff have
access to Plan entry and submission(s).

1. Overview

This entry describes the internal UNHCR procedures that UNHCR offices must follow when planning an emergency response. UNHCR internal plans provide the basis for HQ decisions on urgent allocations of resources and other form of support in emergencies. They enable UNHCR to track and report on progress achieved, and to be accountable for resources it receives.

UNHCR is committed to an inclusive and participatory approach to planning. For refugee emergencies, see the refugee coordination model and refugee response plans; for IDP emergencies, see the Transformative Agenda, the cluster approach and strategic response plans (SRPs) and preliminary response plans (PRPs). This entry focuses on UNHCR’s internal procedures; other humanitarian agencies engaged with UNHCR in emergency situations apply their own agency-specific internal rules and procedures.

Several important processes triggered in an emergency situation have planning dimensions that should be reflected in UNHCR operations plans (‘the Plan’). It is essential to link these processes as a Plan evolves; they should not be seen as separate.

Essential elements of a Plan

- Planning figures and assumptions.
- Needs and priorities.
- Key emergency response strategies, intended results, and activities.
- Resource requirements.

These elements need to be integrated in a given context and timeframe, and agreed by stakeholders.

Note

- Offices should base the development of UNHCR operations plans on contingency plans and preparedness activities whenever these are available, in order to save time.
- Plans should always be aligned with UNHCR’s budget structure and results framework and recorded in UNHCR's planning and budgeting tool (Focus).
- UNHCR staff should not allow UNHCR’s internal planning requirements to drive the external planning process, which requires a broader and more inclusive approach.
2. Main guidance

When and for what purpose

An emergency is a situation in which the lives, rights and well-being of refugees and other persons of concern are or will be threatened unless immediate and appropriate action is taken on a scale that UNHCR’s existing capacity at country and regional level cannot provide. To address an emergency, therefore, UNHCR needs a Plan, supported by resources, that will deliver an adequate and timely response to the emergency needs identified, establish a framework for tracking and reporting on progress, and thereby make UNHCR accountable for additional resources that it receives.

- In an emergency, the first objective is to secure the resources and capacities required to set up and start to deliver a response.

The UNHCR office needs to present a concise emergency request that provides enough detail to permit UNHCR HQ to mobilize the resources required. The Entry on UNHCR's financial resource allocation for emergencies contains templates and timelines. At this early stage, the office should define the minimum elements of the Plan (its structure, a pillar, a population planning group, a goal, main objectives, and principal initial activities).

An initial request should be communicated as soon as possible, if necessary before inter-agency plans have been developed with partners. This does not imply that UNHCR pre-empts the final Plan, which will emerge from an inter-agency planning process, informed by rapid needs assessments. The purpose of an initial request is to enable UNHCR to start urgent life-saving interventions.

- Inter-agency planning processes should be inclusive and participatory; UNHCR Plans should reflect that approach. The initial internal Plan may be amended once inter-agency plans are agreed, aligning UNHCR with the role it assumes in those plans.

At the start of an emergency, initial needs are often met by means of a short-term appropriation from the Operational Reserve (OR), which meets the immediate additional requirements of an operation.

The authority to transfer appropriations from the Emergency Reserve and increase the OL accordingly to mount an initial emergency response in countries included in a newly declared Level 1, 2 and 3 emergencies is delegated to:

a. Directors of Bureaux for requests of up to $5 million per such country;
b. AHC-O for requests of up to $10 million per such country. Such emergency appropriations and
associated OL increases can only be used for OPS and ABOD in country operations. Initial allocations should be released within 24 hours. They should cover immediate response needs, including the need to comply with Minimum Operating Security Standards (MOSS) or other critical security requirements. When the assessed needs of an operation rise above USD 10 million in one financial year, a Supplementary Budget is created. The UNHCR office, in cooperation with the relevant bureau, prepares a detailed Plan with costs, which must be approved by the Resource Planning and Management Board (RPMB). UNHCR then issues a Supplementary Appeal in accordance with its internal financial rules. For more information, see UNHCR supplementary funding appeals.

- UNHCR supplementary appeals for an emergency set out the main elements of the Plan (agreed planning figures and assumptions, key strategies and activities, the budget).

UNHCR shares the appeal with donors and partners in order to raise required funding. The above steps and processes include important planning elements that must be drafted, submitted and recorded in accordance with UNHCR procedure. By linking its planning processes, and continuously reviewing its planning documents, UNHCR is able to produce well-designed and coherent plans that can be communicated to internal and external audiences, implemented rapidly, and reported on in terms that are measurable, enabling it to demonstrate achievements and progress.

Summary of guidance and/or options

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UNHCR's approach to planning focuses on the protection and assistance needs of populations of concern, and uses the UNHCR Results Framework. This identifies a hierarchy of goals, rights groups, objectives, and outputs, as well as indicators to measure achievements against objectives and outputs. Budgeting is done against outputs.

**a) Plan development and key steps**

- **Define the pillar.** UNHCR identifies four budget pillars, corresponding to the status of persons of concern. Refugees and asylum-seekers fall under pillar 1, internally displaced
persons under pillar 4. For other situations, see the chart below.

- **Select or create a population planning group (PPG).** This should represent a specific planning, budgeting and reporting category.
- **Select a corresponding goal.**

Planning for a PPG begins with selecting the goal for a new or existing PPG. As a rule, operations should select an emergency response goal. However, this may not be required in all emergency situations; consider the specific context of the country or region.

Other considerations:

- Normally an existing Population Planning Group (PPG) should be used, combined with a new emergency goal. In order to avoid unnecessary complexity in the operations plan narrative and to facilitate the integration of activities into regular programming post-emergency, a new PPG should only be created if there is an influx of refugees from a different country of origin not covered by an existing PPG or into a new area that will require a distinct response plan post-emergency. If the emergency involves a new population group, create a new PPG. Complete a ‘Chartfield creation request form’ and submit it to DSPR/ARBAS, DSPR/IMAS/Focus and the bureau.
- If a new office needs to be established, with an assigned or new cost centre for separate budgeting and expense tracking, create a new cost centre. Complete a ‘Chartfield creation request form’ and submit it to the bureau; on approval, the bureau should forward it to DSPR/ARBAS.
- If there are new sites (e.g. camps), and it is desirable to plan, budget and monitor programmes at site level, create new site(s). Complete a ‘Chartfield creation request form’ and submit it to DSPR/ARBAS, DSPR/IMAS/Focus and the bureau.

**(b) Results chain for a new situation**

When the Plan's basic structure has been determined, and chartfields created and recorded as necessary (for new PPGs, cost centres, or sites), develop a results chain. Results chains for emergency operations should be kept simple, focusing on the key results the operation expects to achieve in the emergency phase with only a limited number of objectives, outputs and indicators. This will simplify budgeting (including requests for additional resources), partnership agreements, monitoring and reporting. There is always the opportunity to add later new objectives, outputs and indicators post-emergency. The selection of indicators, the establishment of baselines and targets and the inclusion of narrative in the operations plan is not mandatory immediately. However, it is recommended to include them as early as possible in line with the Resource Planning and Management Board (RPMB) submissions.
Select the relevant rights groups (thematic groups of objectives). With few exceptions, any rights group can fall under any goal.

Select objectives and outputs from the pre-defined menu.

Add or select impact indicator(s) for each selected objective; set a baseline; set targets (both prioritized and comprehensive).

Add or select performance indicator(s) for each selected output; set targets (both prioritized and comprehensive).

What is a baseline?

**Baseline:** shows the situation for an impact indicator at the beginning of a planning period (when an emergency has occurred) and is used to measure progress over time.

What is a comprehensive target?

**Comprehensive Targets (OP Targets):** for Impact Indicators and Performance Indicators display the level of planned achievement for a comprehensive plan and if the entire OP budget for an objective or output is made available for the planned implementation period.

What is a prioritized target?

**Prioritized or Operating Level Targets (OL Targets):** for Impact Indicators and Performance Indicators display the level of prioritised planned achievement and with the OL level budget.

The operation selects impact and performance indicators from a pre-defined menu. Each output and objective must have at least one indicator, and may have several.

The operation then sets baselines for impact indicators, and targets for both impact and performance indicators. Comprehensive or overall targets (that assume full funding) and prioritized targets (if funding is incomplete) must be set separately. Every objective should be accompanied by a narrative that presents each deliverable and how it will be implemented. Both comprehensive and prioritized targets must be consistent with objectives, and outputs must be consistent with associated targets and budgets.

Operations are encouraged to choose a limited number of indicators, bearing in mind that each requires clear measurement criteria, a monitoring plan, and data collection mechanisms. If an indicator cannot be measured, it should not be selected.

**(c) Developing budgets**

Operations are encouraged to make use of the [UNHCR Emergency Response Budgeting Template](http://example.com) to assist in developing credible budgets. The overview below addresses comprehensive and prioritized budgets:
Comprehensive budgets = Operations Plan (OP).
Prioritized budgets = Operating level (OL).

Comprehensive (needs-based) budget requirements for operational elements are calculated and entered for each selected output, using relevant chartfields.

The comprehensive budget of an Operations Plan sums the resources that will be required to implement all the interventions necessary to meet the new needs of persons of concern that are due to an emergency situation. Because needs almost always exceed the resources available, UNHCR also prioritizes its interventions, based on the Operating level.

Each Operations Plan (OP) is broken down into two elements: activities and budgets in the operating level (OL); and activities and budgets above operating level (AOL). OL + AOL = OP.

To prioritize, staff must place each objective and output in one of three categories, triggering the assignment of a corresponding budget. An objective and output is

- **Not prioritized** if it is fully above the OL. Implementation is a low priority. OL = 0.
- **Partially prioritized** if it falls partly in the OL. Implementation is a medium priority. OP>OL.
- **Prioritized** if it falls fully in the OL. Implementation is a high priority. OP = OL.

Because emergency situations are volatile, both comprehensive and prioritized Operations Plans need frequent revision. They should be seen as documents in evolution, responsive to the needs of populations of concern, inter-agency planning, available information, and decisions on resource allocation.

**Post-emergency phase**
UNHCR's emergency interventions should eventually be integrated in longer term planning exercises or phased out. Such decisions (including their timing and process) should be made by the UNHCR office in consultation with the relevant bureau. The bureau should confirm decisions on phasing out or integration in regular operations management cycle, after consulting other divisions, no later than in January for the next planning year.
How to implement this at field level?

(a) Initial stage
At the start of an emergency, the first priority is to obtain essential resources and other forms of support from UNHCR HQ. The UNHCR office submits a request for initial allocation of additional budgetary resources.

This request describes essential elements of the Plan, and identifies the resources required. For a new emergency response, the essential elements are:

- The Plan's structure (pillar, PPG, goal).
- Main activities, grouped in terms of initial objectives, with budgets at the level of outputs.

On approval by UNHCR HQ, this basic planning information should be entered in Focus and submitted.

(b) Integration of inter-agency planning
The basic Plan is elaborated and adjusted as more information becomes available about the needs of persons of concern, the role UNHCR will assume in the emergency response, and through the inter-agency planning process. The UNHCR office adjusts the internal Plan to make it consistent with the outcome of the inter-agency planning process.

When the requirements for a programme in a given year exceed USD 10 million, the Resource Planning and Management Board (RPMB) must establish a Supplementary Programme with an additional operations plan and Operating Level.

Further requests to increase requirements must be accompanied by a memorandum justifying each request, and Appendix 1A or Appendix 1AA describing expected results.

(c) Internal Plan records
When response delivery and implementation are under way, the UNHCR office must update the Plan in Focus, to establish accountability and enable it to report on achievements. The Plan should be amended to include:

- Selected objectives and final narratives at the level of objectives.
- Selected and specified outputs.
- Targets and baselines for impact indicators.
- Targets for performance indicators, to measure the performance of both UNHCR and partner agencies.

There is no set term by which an operation should have recorded all elements of the Plan,
because by definition an emergency response cannot be programmed until it occurs. Operations are strongly encouraged to record the internal Plan in UNHCR’s internal systems and records (Focus, MSRP, Project Partnership Agreements) before the end of the calendar year in which an emergency occurs.

(d) Post-emergency
In the final stage of an operations plan in emergencies, UNHCR manages disengagement, phase-out or integration in the longer term planning. This is determined by the needs of persons of concern, and involves planning, implementation and reporting. Decisions are taken in consultation with the relevant bureau.

Annexes

Sample request to budget committee for new additional requirements

UNHCR, checklist for setting up emergency programmes in Focus

UNHCR, Financial Resource Request Form

UNHCR, frequently used objectives (refugee and IDP operations) in emergencies

UNHCR Results Framework

UNHCR, chartfield creation form

Emergency Response Budgeting Template Rev 2020

UNHCR, Budget Control Plan (BCP) form

3. Links

UNHCR indicator guidance
UNHCR Focus practical guidelines for planning
UNHCR Quick Focus Guide

4. Main contacts

The Division of Strategic Planning and Results, Integrated Programme Service at:
hqdpsmps@unhcr.org.