

Research Briefing

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Refugees and the UK's international aid response

Summary

- 1 Who is a refugee?
- 2 Refugee risks and access to services
- 3 UK international aid programmes and spending on refugees
- 4 UK aid strategies and their effectiveness

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Summary

As of mid-2023, there were an estimated [36.4 million refugees worldwide](#), mostly from Syria, Afghanistan, and Ukraine. In recent years, most refugees and asylum seekers have come from only a few countries. Just under 40% are under the age of 18.

This briefing sets out who refugees are, the risks they might face, and related UK aid and diplomatic activity.

What is a refugee and what are their rights?

The UN's 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees [defines a refugee](#) as someone who is “unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion”.

Most of the international obligations relating to refugees come from [the 1951 Convention](#). One of its core protections is the principle of ‘non-refoulement’, which means not to expel or return refugees if this would make them unsafe.

[International human rights law](#) (PDF), which applies universally, places specific protections and obligations on states depending on the circumstances of each person.

How many refugees are there globally, and what challenges do they face?

Between 2010 and 2022, [data from the UN High Commissioner for Refugees \(UNHCR\)](#) shows that the number of forcibly displaced people, including refugees, rose from 40 million to more than 108 million.

By mid-2023, UNHCR had 30.5 million refugees under its mandate (meaning they fell under its legal obligation for protection). More than half of these people, and others in need of protection under the UN, came from Syria, Afghanistan, or Ukraine.

[Iran and Turkey were the countries to host the most refugees](#) – 3.4 million each by mid-2023. Slightly over half of all refugees and asylum seekers are male, and [just under half are under the age of 18](#).

As [highlighted by the World Health Organization](#), refugees, forcibly displaced people and migrants are commonly at risk of experiencing poor living, housing, and working conditions, xenophobia, trafficking, violence, and poor access to health services.

How does the UK aid budget support refugees?

[Official development assistance](#) (ODA) is aid intended to promote the economic development and welfare of developing countries and is reported under Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) rules.

There are no official statistics on the amount that countries spend on aid for refugees. However, countries do report the amount that they spend on refugees within their own borders. This is because such spending can be reported as aid [under international-agreed OECD rules](#) for the refugee's first 12 months within the country.

Several members of the OECD's [Development Assistance Committee](#), including the UK, have recently been spending increasing proportions of their aid budgets on refugees within their borders. In the UK this has happened alongside [wider spending pressures on the aid budget](#).

Looking at projects which mention the word 'refugee' in [statistics from the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office](#) (FCDO), last updated in September 2023, show that the amount spent on refugees outside the UK has been decreasing since 2019.

However, the amount spent within the UK rose sharply in 2022 because of refugees from Afghanistan and Ukraine (see the Commons Library briefing, [The UK aid budget and support for refugees in the UK in 2022/23](#)).

The UK Government has rejected [a recommendation from the Commons International Development Committee](#) (PDF) that the Treasury ringfences the equivalent of 0.5% of gross national income in the aid budget for development assistance outside the UK, [arguing it is "unaffordable"](#). The government has announced an additional £2.5 billion in aid for 2022 to 2024 to help reduce the effect of in-donor refugee costs.

How effective is UK aid to refugees overseas?

Ahead of the 2023 Global Refugee Forum, in May 2023 the International Development Committee reported on [UK aid for refugee host countries](#).

It said that since the UK's aid budget was reduced to 0.5% of gross national income, it had provided less aid to countries that host large numbers of Syrian refugees, such as Jordan and Lebanon. It cited evidence from UNHCR that host governments had "reduced confidence" that the international

community would continue to provide long-term support to Syrian refugees in these countries.

The [government responded to the report](#) in August 2023 and either agreed or partially agreed to all of its recommendations.

The government said it had been the largest donor to the International Development Association (part of the World Bank Group) from 2017 to 2020 when £2.5 billion came from the UK, and in 2021 to 2022 with £3.1 billion. Some of this funding went to the [World Bank's Window for Host Communities and Refugees](#).

UK international development white paper

In November 2023 the UK Government published a [new international development white paper](#) (PDF) which it described as a “re-energised international development agenda”.

It includes four points on forced displacement, including increased global action and calls for refugees and displaced people to be included in national programmes, and improved access to education, particularly for girls who are refugees or displaced.

It also focuses on irregular and illegal migration, envisaging “safe, orderly and legal migration” by 2030.

The [Chair of the International Development Committee, Sarah Champion](#), said the white paper was “highly ambitious” and “obviously directed at achieving impact for years”. However, she said that the UK is going to be “running to catch up with the impact of [its] own aid budget cuts”, because of the reduction in aid spending from [0.7% to 0.5% of gross national income](#).

1

Who is a refugee?

The definition of a refugee

The commonly used definition of a refugee was coined in 1951, when the United Nations adopted the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees. The convention defined a refugee as:

someone who is unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion.¹

The 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees expanded the remit of the protocol, as the convention was limited to mostly protecting European refugees following the Second World War.²

How many people are refugees globally?

Data on displaced people is often collected in challenging environments and is not always comparable across countries or organisations.

In mid-2023, there were 36.4 million refugees and 30.5 million refugees who fell under the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees' (UNHCR) mandate, meaning they fell under its legal obligation for protection.³

Across the Middle East, UNHCR, also known as the UN Refugee Agency, says a further 5.9 million refugees are in 60 camps under mandate of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA).⁴

Between 2010 and 2022, UNHCR data shows that the number of forcibly displaced people, including refugees, rose from 40 million to more than 108 million.⁵ Forcibly displaced people include refugees, asylum seekers, internally displaced people and other people needing international protection.

¹ UNHCR, [What is a refugee?](#)

² UNHCR, [About UNHCR: The 1951 refugee convention](#)

³ UNHCR, [Mid-year trends 2023](#). For which groups fall within mandate of the UNHCR, see UNHCR, [Mandate for refugees, stateless persons and IDPs](#), undated

⁴ UNHCR, [Figures at a glance](#)

⁵ UNHCR, [Global trends report 2022](#), 14 June 2023, p2

1 Forcibly displaced persons

The UN defines forcibly displaced persons as: “forced to move, within or across borders, due to armed conflict, persecution, terrorism, human rights violations and abuses, violence, the adverse effects of climate change, natural disasters, development projects or a combination of these factors”. They may include:

Refugees

UNHCR defines as refugee as: “someone who is unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion.”⁶

Those in need of humanitarian protection

Humanitarian protection may be granted if people applying for international protection are not eligible for refugee status or subsidiary protection but are still considered in need of protection because of special humanitarian reasons.⁷ It is not harmonised across countries or within the EU and the definition or criteria may change.

Asylum-seekers

The International Rescue Committee defines an asylum-seeker as: “someone who is also seeking international protection from dangers in his or her home country, but whose claim for refugee status hasn’t been determined legally.”⁸

Migrants

The International Organization for Migration, a UN body, describes a migrant as someone who “moves away from [their] place of usual residence, whether within a country or across an international border, temporarily or permanently, and for a variety of reasons.”⁹ There is no universally agreed definition.

Internally displaced persons

The UN defines internally displaced people as being: “forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognized border.”¹⁰

⁶ UNHRC, [What is a refugee?](#)

⁷ European Commission, [Humanitarian protection](#)

⁸ International Rescue Committee, [Migrants, asylum seekers, refugees and immigrants: What’s the difference?](#) 13 July 2022

⁹ International Organization for Migration, [Who is a migrant?](#) (accessed 8 June 2023)

¹⁰ UN, [About internally displaced persons](#)

1.1

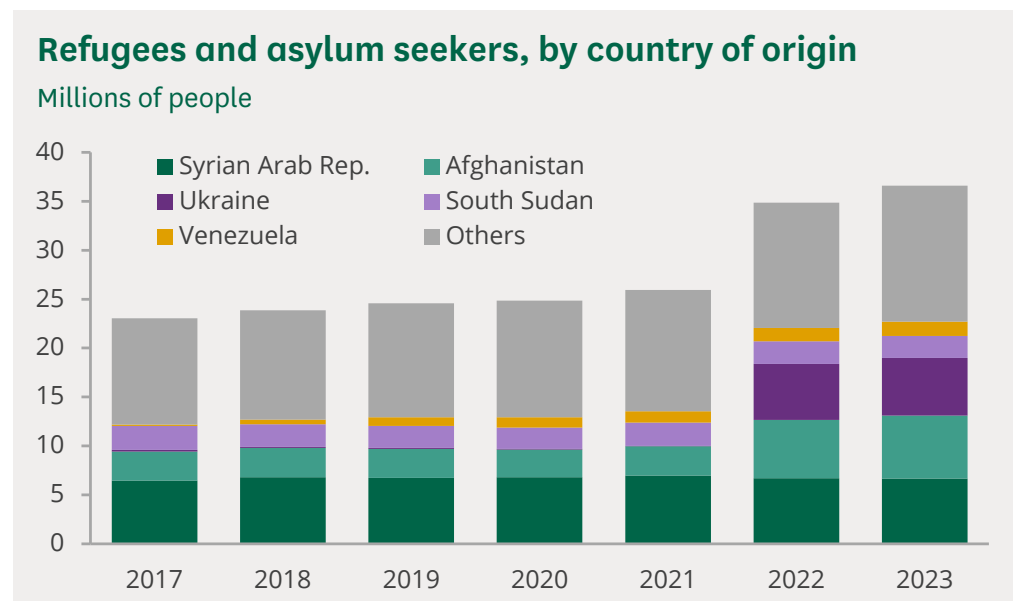
Which countries do most refugees come from?

In the first half of 2023, 62% of refugees under the UN's mandate and other people needing international protection came from five countries:

- Syria: 6.7 million
- Afghanistan: 6.4 million
- Ukraine: 5.9 million
- South Sudan: 2.2 million
- Venezuela: 1.5 million.¹¹

As of mid-2023, 13 countries were both the country of origin and country of asylum for over 100,000 refugees (including Turkey, Iran, and Pakistan).

In most years, most refugees and asylum seekers come from only a few countries. The next chart shows that for at least the last six years, more refugees and asylum seekers have come from Syria than from anywhere else, although a large number also came from Ukraine in 2022 and 2023 following the Russian invasion.



Source: UNHCR, [Refugee Data Finder](#), last updated 24 October 2023

¹¹ UNHCR, [Refugee Data Finder](#), accessed 15 February 2024

1.2

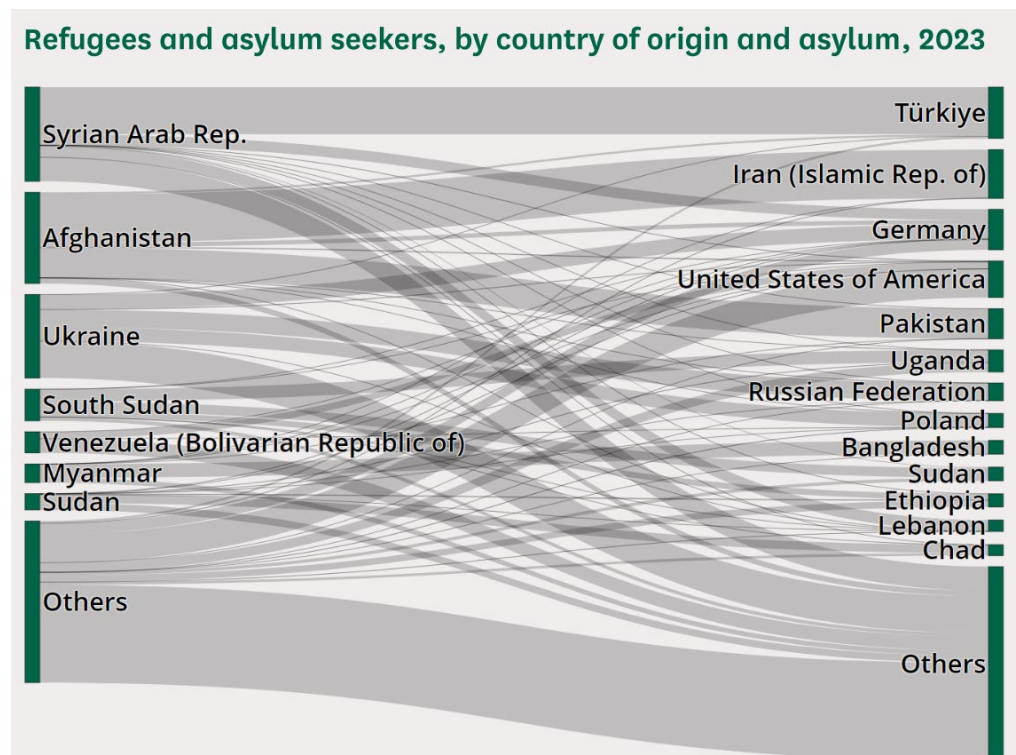
Which countries host the most refugees?

The countries receiving large numbers of refugees often tend to be those near the refugees' countries of origin.

Between 2017 and 2023, Turkey has been the country of asylum for more refugees and asylum seekers than any other country, largely because it takes in a large number of Syrian refugees. In mid-2023, Turkey had received almost 10% of all refugees and asylum seekers recorded so far that year.

The next chart shows the movement of all refugees and asylum seekers in 2023 (up to the middle of the year). This shows that the largest individual movement was from Afghanistan to Iran.

Read more on in our briefing on [the expulsion of Afghans from Pakistan and Iran](#).



Source: UNHCR, [Refugee Data Finder](#), last updated 24 October 2023

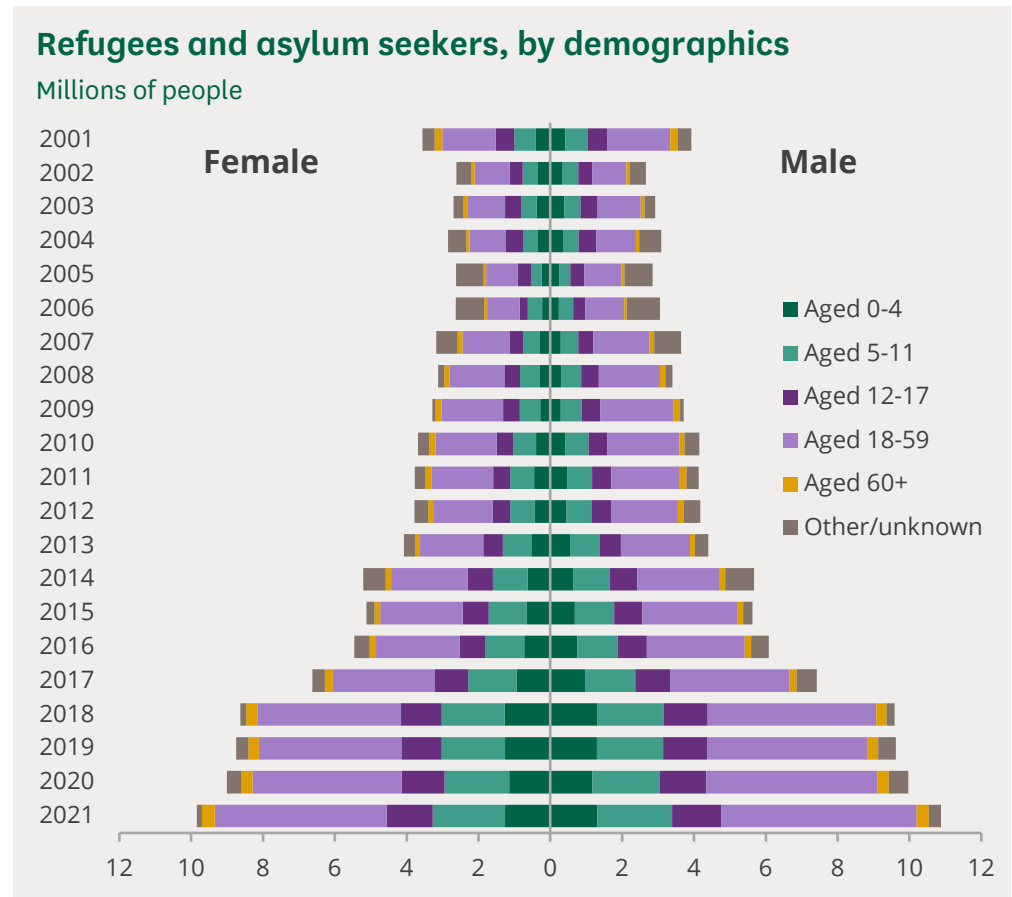
Some countries receive large numbers of refugees from a particular origin – for example, Uganda and Sudan both appear high up the list almost entirely because they receive many refugees from South Sudan, and almost all of the refugees going to Bangladesh are from Myanmar.

In mid-2023, about 40% of the refugees coming to the UK (about 213,800) were from Ukraine. The second largest country of origin was Iran (43,200), followed by Afghanistan (27,300).

1.3

Who is most likely to become a refugee?

As the next chart shows, roughly equal proportions of refugees and asylum seekers are male and female, and just under 40% are under the age of 18.



Source: UNHCR, [Refugee Data Finder](#), last updated 27 October 2022

Proportions for both age and gender have remained reasonably steady over the years. As of 2022, the most recent year for which we have data, 41% of refugees and asylum seekers were male and 41% were female (gender was not recorded for the remaining 18%).

1.4

Where are the world's largest refugee camps?

The world's largest refugee camps are in Asia, Africa and the Middle East:¹²

- Kutupalong Expansion Site in the Cox's Bazar region of Bangladesh had a population of 943,000 in October 2022, who are mostly Rohingya refugees from Myanmar.

¹² UNHCR, [Refugee Camps](#), accessed 14 June 2023

- Adjumani district in Uganda has several settlements for refugees and asylum seekers, with a population of 214,843 in September 2023. Most are from South Sudan.¹³
- Bidibidi refugee settlement in Uganda had a population of 196,297 September 2023, mostly from South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.¹⁴
- Dadaab refugee complex in Kenya had a population of 233,828 in January 2023 of refugees and asylum seekers, mostly from Somalia.¹⁵
- Kakuma Refugee camp in Kenya had a population of 252,066 across the camp and settlements in January 2023, mostly from South Sudan, Somalia, Sudan and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.¹⁶
- Za'atari refugee camp in Jordan had a population of 83,400 June 2023, who are Syrian refugees.¹⁷
- Azraq Refugee Camp in Jordan had a population of 40,600 in June 2023, who are Syrian refugees.¹⁸

1.5

The role of the UN Refugee Agency

UNHCR is mandated to assist stateless persons and people fleeing their homes, provide aid in emergencies, safeguard human rights and advocate for long-term solutions for refugees.¹⁹ Its role is set out in the [Statute of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees](#).

In 2024, the agency has a global annual budget of US\$10.6 billion.²⁰

The independent Inspector General oversees UNHCR and provides the secretariat for UNHCR's Independent Audit and Oversight Committee. UNHCR's work is evaluated by the Evaluation Office.

The then—Department for International Development (DFID) reviewed its multilateral partnerships and the performance of such organisations in 2016, including UNHCR. It concluded that UNHCR should “work more and better” with its partners in humanitarian responses and in protracted crises.²¹

¹³ Operational Data Portal, [Uganda - Refugee Statistics Map - September 2023](#)

¹⁴ Operational Data Portal, [Uganda - Refugee Statistics Map - September 2023](#)

¹⁵ UNHCR, [Kenya statistics package \(PDF\)](#), 31 January 2023

¹⁶ As above

¹⁷ Reliefweb, [UNHCR Jordan: Azraq and Za'atari camps dashboard June 2023](#)

¹⁸ As above

¹⁹ UNHCR, [What we do](#)

²⁰ UNHCR, [Budget and Expenditure](#)

²¹ DFID, [Raising the standard: The Multilateral Development Review 2016](#)

DFID also said that UNHCR needed to “strengthen its approach to transparency and improve its programming further with respect to the environment as well as its management of fraud.”

In the 2016 review, the UK rated UNHCR’s organisations strength as adequate and its alignment with UK objectives as good. However, it said that UN agencies were not working together and that despite improvements, there were 24 UN development system agencies holding 1,432 separate offices in 180 countries.²²

Recent strategies and evaluations on the work of UNHCR can be found on the [Evaluation Office’s website](#).

²² DFID, [Raising the standard: The Multilateral Development Review 2016](#), p5 and p25

2

Refugee risks and access to services

The World Health Organization (WHO) states that refugees and migrants are some of the most vulnerable groups who frequently face discrimination. It lists xenophobia, poor living, housing, and working conditions, and poor access to health services as common problems.²³

Displaced persons, including refugees and asylum seekers, may be detained, spend time in refugee camps, face dangerous journeys, and be at risk of human trafficking and violence, including sexual violence.

Access to services, such as health, education and housing, is determined by the policies and legislation of the countries hosting refugees.

2.1

Health risks and access to care

The UNHCR says refugees should have access to the same or similar healthcare as host populations.²⁴

However, as the WHO notes, the health of migrants and refugees can be affected by poor housing, overcrowding, education levels, difficulties accessing clean water and sanitation, poor air quality, food insecurity, vulnerability to sexual and gender-based violence, stereotyping based on their culture or gender, and the negative impacts of immigration detention.²⁵

In its [World report on the health of refugees and migrants](#) in July 2022, the WHO published the 'first global review of health and migration', calling for "urgent and concerted action" to support refugees and migrants in accessing health care. It said evidence on refugee and migrant health remained "fragmented" and that comparable data across countries was "urgently needed" to track progress against the UN's sustainable development goals.²⁶

Despite limitations in data collection, WHO concluded that being a refugee or migrant carried "significant health risks, to the extent that displacement or migration must itself be considered a determinant of health".

²³ WHO, [Refugee and migrant health](#)

²⁴ UNHCR, [Access to healthcare](#)

²⁵ WHO, [Addressing the needs of refugees and migrants: an inclusive approach to Universal Health Coverage](#), February 2023, p2

²⁶ This section sourced from WHO, [World report on the health of refugees and migrants](#), 20 July 2022

The WHO report said there are subgroups of refugees and migrants at high risk of poor health, death and disappearance, made worse by the conditions they face during migration or displacement:

- Male migrants, for example, are at higher risk of occupational injuries because they are likely to be working in industries such as mining and construction.
- Women are likely to work in domestic services and caregiving, where musculoskeletal diseases and stress-related conditions occur.
- Refugees in the health sector are found to often face discrimination from patients and staff.
- Refugees and migrants, especially women, often experience sexual and gender-based violence during displacement and in host countries. They are also less likely to be aware of contraceptives and some groups lack knowledge of sexual health risks, such as sexually transmitted infections.

The WHO also found that refugee and migrant women may not seek sexual health services in high-income host countries because of “feelings of shame or stigma around FGM and discrimination from providers.”²⁷

Mental health risks

Common mental health disorders, such as anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress disorder are more prevalent among migrants and refugees than host populations, according to the WHO.

The WHO says that poor access to mental health support, disruption to care because of moving around and social factors, such as discrimination and being separate from family members, particularly for unaccompanied children, contribute to poor mental health among these populations.²⁸

In a 2021 study looking at the mental health of refugees, global policy and the conflict in Syria, academics highlighted high rates of mental disorder linked to trauma, stress and cultural isolation because of forced migration.²⁹ This was alongside what they described as a “glaring scarcity” of mental health services in countries that had been affected by the conflict.

The study found that while most countries hosting Syrian refugees (including Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Germany) had national legislation and policies related to refugee healthcare, all had implementation problems.³⁰

²⁷ WHO, [World report on the health of refugees and migrants](#), 20 July 2022

²⁸ WHO, [Mental health and forced displacement](#), 31 August 2021

²⁹ Kelso Cratsley, Mohamad Adam Brooks and Tim K. Mackey, [Refugee mental health, global health policy, and the Syrian crisis](#), 3 August 2021

³⁰ As above

WHO strategy and objectives to 2030

The WHO argues that “few countries have taken the initiative to include refugees and migrants in national strategies to achieve Universal Health Coverage” and that it is more costly to exclude them from health policies than to include them.³¹

The WHO's 2019 to 2023 global action plan on promoting the health of refugees and migrants aims to improve global health by “addressing the health and well-being of refugees and migrants in an inclusive, comprehensive manner”.³² The action plan has been extended until 2030.³³ Its goals include to:

- advocate for refugee and migrant health to be mainstreamed into global, regional and country agendas.
- strengthen health monitoring and information systems.
- support improvements to evidence-based health communication and counter misperceptions about the health of refugees and migrants.³⁴

2 Further reading on the WHO and on human rights law

- World Health Organization, [Addressing the needs of refugees and migrants: an inclusive approach to Universal Health coverage](#), 2023
- World Health Organization, [promoting the health of refugees and migrants: Experiences from around the world](#), 2023
- European Court of Human Rights, [Guide on the case-law of the European Convention on Human Rights: Immigration](#), updated 31 August 2022
- International Justice Resource Centre, [Asylum and the Rights of Refugees](#)
- International Justice Resource Centre, [Immigration and Migrants' Rights](#)
- UN High Commissioner for Refugees, [Compilation of International Human Rights Law and Standards on Immigration Detention](#).

³¹ WHO, [Mental health and forced displacement](#), 31 August 2021

³² WHO, [Promoting the health of refugees and migrants: global action plan, 2019-2023](#), 23 May 2019, p106

³³ WHO, [The World Health Assembly extends the global action plan for refugee and migrant health until 2030](#), 26 May 2030

³⁴ WHO, [Promoting the health of refugees and migrants: global action plan, 2019-2023](#), 23 May 2019, pp107-112

2.2

Access to education and retention

Article 22 of the UN Refugee convention states countries should “accord to refugees the same treatment as it accorded to nationals with respect of elementary education.”³⁵

An estimated 43.3 million children under the age of 18 were forcibly displaced at the end of 2022.³⁶ From 2018 to 2022 there were also 1.9 million children born as refugees (an average of 385,000 children each year).

UNHCR reported that at the end of 2022, the school-age refugee population had increased to 14.8 million people, up from 10 million in 2021. It estimated that 51% were not in school.³⁷

In the 2021 to 2022 academic year, the average gross enrolment rate of refugees in pre-primary education globally was 38%. For primary education there were 65% of refugee children enrolled. For secondary education it was 41% and for above school age (tertiary education), it was 6%.³⁸

UNHCR's 2023 education report shows a slightly higher enrolment rate among boys who are refugees than girls, with a difference of 36% of boys enrolled at secondary level compared with 35% of girls, although not all the countries studied provided this data. On average there is gender parity but some countries, such as Senegal and Gabon, have bigger gender gaps and sometimes in favour of refugee girls' education.³⁹

The UN has a refugee education strategy in place, aiming to include young refugees in equitable quality education that “prepares them for participation in cohesive societies” by 2030.⁴⁰

3 Rohingya refugee children's education in Myanmar

2023 was the first year that refugee children of all ages were studying under the formal Myanmar curriculum, which began in 2021.

In July that year, Unicef, the United Nations Children's Fund, which provides humanitarian and development aid to children globally, reported that a record 300,000 Rohingya refugee children were enrolled in school for the 2023 to 2024 academic year.⁴¹ It said the growth in enrolment was because of more girls and teenagers attending education, following a campaign aimed at parents and the expansion of the curriculum to older students.

On the first day of the school term, Unicef appealed for US\$33 million to “urgently” support their education in 2023/24.⁴²

In April 2022, [Amnesty International and other human rights organisations had issued a joint statement](#) asking the Government of Bangladesh to restore and strengthen community-led schools in Rohingya refugee camps. The statement

said that around 30 of these schools had been shut down or dismantled by authorities since December 2021 and that nearly half a million Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh are children.⁴³

2.3

Access to employment

The ability for refugees, and displaced people more broadly, to work depends on the national law of host countries.

The [1952 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees](#) says that states signed up to it must treat refugees lawfully staying in their territory the same way as nationals, in relation to: hours of work, overtime arrangements, holidays with pay, restrictions on work, minimum age of employment, apprenticeship and training, women's work and the work of young persons, and the enjoyment of the benefits of collective bargaining.⁴⁴

One of the four objectives of the [2018 Global Compact on Refugees](#) is to enhance the self-reliance of refugees.

Refugees International, an independent aid and advocacy organisation, reported on [global refugee rights to work](#) in 2022, alongside the Center for Global Development and Asylum Access. It looked at 51 countries hosting 87% of the world's refugee population at the end of 2021 focusing on legal rights to work and practice. It found a “stark difference” between the two.⁴⁵

The study, which did not include the UK, found that although 62% of refugees live in countries where the legal framework for work rights is “adequate or better” (based on a five-point scale), many laws are not widely implemented.⁴⁶

High-income countries, the report found, often had stronger work rights for refugees in law and in practice. However, they also present access by

³⁵ UNHCR, [Convention and Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees \(PDF\)](#), 1951

³⁶ UNHCR, [Refugee Data Finder](#), accessed 28 December 2023

³⁷ UNHCR, [Education Report 2023](#), p6

³⁸ As above

³⁹ As above

⁴⁰ UNHCR, [Education 2030: A Strategy for Refugee Education](#), September 2019

⁴¹ Unicef, [Against the odds, children begin the new school year in Rohingya refugee camps](#), 23 July 2023

⁴² As above

⁴³ Amnesty International, [Bangladesh: Restore and strengthen capacity of community-led schools in Rohingya camps](#), 28 April 2022

⁴⁴ Article 24 – Labour legislation and social security

⁴⁵ Refugees International, [2022 Global Refugee Work Rights Report: Key takeaways](#), 28 July 2022. The study included the EU, Austria, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Portugal and Spain.

⁴⁶ As above

“significantly limiting refugee status”, restricting work rights for people seeking asylum and limiting territorial access for those wanting to claim asylum.

2.4

Safety and gender-based violence

Refugees and migrants are particularly vulnerable to exploitation, homelessness, gender-based violence and poverty due to social, political and economic exclusion.⁴⁷

Sexual violence against refugees is widespread with women and girls particularly being most vulnerable during their flight and exile, according to the UNHCR.⁴⁸ Those most at risk are unaccompanied women, lone female heads of households, unaccompanied children, children in foster care and anyone in detention and detention-like situations.⁴⁹

In an article on the increasing number of women migrating independently from Central America and the Caribbean, the International Organization for Migration (IOM), highlighted that unsafe or irregular migration routes increase the risk of gender-based violence, including human trafficking.⁵⁰ It says that migration governance must be human rights-based and gender-responsive to reduce gender-based violence.

Between July and December 2019, the International Rescue Committee, a UK-based aid and development charity, found that one in four women and girls screened in Cox's Bazar refugee camp, Bangladesh, had survived gender-based violence. In 2020, the charity published [The Shadow Pandemic: Gender-based Violence among Rohingya refugees in Cox's Bazar](#).

Freelance journalist, Sally Hayden, has highlighted the situation of migrants and refugees in detention centres, particularly those attempting to reach Europe through Libya. In her book, *My Fourth Time, We Drowned*, she details correspondence with detainees inside detention centres, who reported rape, sexual abuse and torture.⁵¹ For more on detention centres, see section 2.6 below.

In May 2023, the independent medical humanitarian organisation, Médecins Sans Frontiers (MSF), reported that within two weeks, it had treated more than 670 victims of sexual violence in camps for displaced people around

⁴⁷ WHO, [Refugee and migrant health](#)

⁴⁸ UNHCR, [Sexual violence against refugees](#), 1995

⁴⁹ UNHCR, [Sexual violence against refugees](#), 1995, 1.2

⁵⁰ IOM, [What makes migrants vulnerable to gender-based violence?](#) Gender-based violence, sometimes referred to as GBV, is defined by the IOM as “any harmful act that is perpetrated against a person’s will and that is based on socially ascribed (i.e. gender) differences between males and females.” It disproportionately affects women, girls and people of diverse gender identities or sexual orientations because of underlying gender inequalities.

⁵¹ Sally Hayden, *My Fourth Time, We Drowned*, 2022

Goma in the Democratic Republic of Congo. MSF said: “Nearly 60 per cent of the victims were attacked less than 72 hours before coming to MSF clinics, illustrating the urgency of the situation.”

More on MSF's reporting on sexual violence and displacement can be found on its website: [Sexual violence | MSF medical response](#).⁵²

The Library's briefing [Conflict-related violence and the UK's approach](#) covers strategies to prevent and respond to gender-based violence in conflict scenarios.

4 Further reading

The publication [Migratory Birds](#), run by the Greece-based Network for Children's Rights, is written by young refugees. It discusses common themes such as violence against children, a lack of job opportunities, and the threat of terrorist groups in their home countries.

The UN Refugee Agency also runs '[refugee voices](#)', a series written by refugees across Asia and the South Pacific.

2.5

Human trafficking

Refugees and people seeking asylum are also at risk of becoming victims of human trafficking and smuggling.⁵³ The UN cites the lack of usual support networks for refugees, the need to move 'irregularly' to seek protection, and a lack of access to basic resources as some of the reasons making them particularly vulnerable to criminals.⁵⁴

For example, in Libya, refugees are particularly vulnerable to human trafficking and modern slavery, where people trying to reach Europe are “routinely imprisoned, forced into labour under inhuman conditions, and even ‘sold into sex slavery or to smugglers by detention centre staff’,” according to

⁵² MSF, [Sexual violence](#), msf.org

⁵³ Human trafficking, as set out in the '[Palermo Protocol](#)', is the “recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation.” The Home Affairs Committee notes that the definition in the UK's [Modern Slavery Act 2015](#) is narrower.

People smuggling, set out in Article 3(a) of the [Smuggling of Migrants Protocol](#) is the “procurement, in order to obtain, directly or indirectly, a financial or other material benefit, of the illegal entry of a person into a State Party of which the person is not a national or a permanent resident.”

⁵⁴ UNHCR, [Trafficking in persons](#)”

Laura Schack, an analyst at Stop the Traffik, a charity working to prevent human trafficking.⁵⁵

In July 2023, a UN expert said they were “very concerned” over the situation for migrants and refugees in Libya, including trafficking victims, “who have also been transferred to detention centres where no humanitarian agencies, lawyers or civil society organisations have been granted access”.⁵⁶

Stop the Traffik says that also in Greece, refugees and asylum seekers can be targeted for sexual and labour exploitation. In a 2020 to 2021 campaign to prevent young people from becoming victims, the charity found that unaccompanied minors were particularly vulnerable to traffickers.⁵⁷

Contributing factors included pressure to send money home, the need to pay smugglers, homelessness and poverty, not understanding their legal rights, lacking trust in organisations, delays in the asylum process without a right to work, and insufficient financial support once asylum is granted.⁵⁸

Stop the Traffik argued there is a lack of data and detailed understanding of how traffickers work, including a lack of awareness among authorities, asylum seekers, and that local authorities lack capacity and resources.

2.6

Detention and holding centres

Detention refers to the deprivation of liberty caused by the act of confining a person in a narrowly bounded place, under the control or with the consent of a state, or, in [non-international armed conflicts](#), a non-state actor.⁵⁹

The UN's International Organization for Migration (IOM) describes detention centres as a “specialized facility used for the detention of migrants with the primary purpose of facilitating administrative measures such as identification, processing of a claim or enforcing a removal order”.⁶⁰

It notes that migrants are held in different contexts and facilities, which could include designated immigration detention facilities, removal or transit centres, closed refugee camps, criminal prisons, police lockups, and ships. Whatever the setting, safeguards guaranteed by international law apply.

⁵⁵ Laura Schack, [Overcoming Barriers to Preventing the Human Trafficking of Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Greece](#), Oxford University Faculty of Law blog, 15 December 2022.

⁵⁶ UNHCR, [Libya: UN experts alarmed at reports of trafficking in persons, arbitrary detention, enforced disappearances and torture of migrants and refugees](#), 21 July 2023

⁵⁷ Stop the Traffik, [Overcoming barriers to preventing the human trafficking of refugees and asylum seekers in Greece](#), 4 January 2023

⁵⁸ Laura Schack, [Overcoming Barriers to Preventing the Human Trafficking of Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Greece](#), Oxford University Faculty of Law blog, 15 December 2022

⁵⁹ International Committee of the Red Cross, [Detention](#)

⁶⁰ IOM, [Glossary on Migration \(PDF\)](#), 2019, p48

The detention of migrants often takes the form of ‘administrative detention’, which refers to the “deprivation of liberty decided by the competent administrative authority of a State, whether it is subject to judicial review or not”. The IOM says this type of detention is usually less regulated with fewer guarantees to legality and due process than in criminal detention.⁶¹

Some detention settings have attracted particular concern. In 2017 [Médecins Sans Frontiers \(MSF\) reported from inside Libyan centres](#) reporting that they were unregulated and people were being detained arbitrarily and without guaranteed access to healthcare. MSF said that medical assistance was being provided by a “handful” of humanitarian organisations, including the UN, and access was dependent on who was in charge of the centres: armed groups, militias, and Libyan authorities with “blurred lines between the authorities and trafficking networks”.⁶²

Journalist Sally Hayden has also reported on the conditions facing predominantly east and west African migrants and asylum-seekers in centres in Libya while trying to reach Europe. In her book, *My Fourth Time, We Drowned*, published in 2022, she documented torture, violence, starvation, forced labour, fear, rape and sexual violence used against people detained, as well as the views of detainees on international policy and support.

2.7

Accommodation, shelters and camps

Refugees and asylum-seekers may be placed in camps, shelters, with host families, or in alternative accommodation. Around 78% of refugees live in cities, according to UNHCR, and although there are better employment opportunities in them, refugees may face “major challenges”, including living in collective centres and informal settlements.⁶³

Refugee camps can limit the rights and freedoms of refugees staying in them and can have high running costs over many years, UNHCR says.⁶⁴ The UN’s [Special Rapporteur on the right to adequate housing](#) states that camps are “often dilapidated and overcrowded, providing inadequate shelter and services.”⁶⁵ Camps may also allow for conditions which result in domestic violence.

Article 21 of the convention relating to the status of refugees states that host states should provide refugees who are lawfully staying in that state with housing that is no less favourable than that provided to other foreigners:

⁶¹ IOM, [Glossary on Migration \(PDF\)](#), 2019, p6

⁶² Médecins Sans Frontiers, [Difficult choices: providing healthcare in detention centres in Libya](#), 2017

⁶³ UNHCR, [Refugee Camps](#), accessed 14 June 2023

⁶⁴ UNHCR, [Camp Strategy considerations](#), 29 April 2022

⁶⁵ Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), [Migration and the right to housing](#)

As regards housing, the Contracting States, insofar as the matter is regulated by laws or regulations or is subject to the control of public authorities, shall accord refugees lawfully staying in their territory treatment as favourable as possible and, in any event, not less favourable than that accorded to aliens generally in the same circumstances.⁶⁶

[Article 6 of the convention](#) describes what is meant by “in the same circumstances”.

2.8

Climate change and climate refugees

The term ‘climate refugees’ refers to large-scale migration and mass movements of people across borders which are partly caused by weather-related disasters.⁶⁷

Because the decision to migrate is dependent on many factors, including family ties, employment and safety, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC, a UN body) found in a 2018 report that research on the risks of global warming heading above 1.5°C and migration specifically, is lacking.⁶⁸

In 2021, the World Bank has predicted that [between 44 million and 216 million people could be forced to move within their countries by 2050](#).⁶⁹ In a 2021 report the bank said that immediate action to reduce global emissions could reduce this number by 80%.

Sub-Saharan Africa and East Asia and the Pacific are expected to have the highest internal migration due to climate change (86 million and 49 million internal migrants, respectively).⁷⁰

Climate changes may exacerbate pressures faced by societies hosting a large number of refugees. For example, the UN reports around 90% of refugees and displaced Venezuelans (who are [classified under a separate category](#)) come from countries most vulnerable and least ready to adapt to climate change. 70% of internally displaced people due to violence or conflict are also hosted in these countries.⁷¹

⁶⁶ UNHCR, [Convention relating to the Status of Refugees](#), 28 July 1951

⁶⁷ World Economic Forum, [Climate refugees – the world’s forgotten victims](#), 18 June 2021

⁶⁸ IPCC, [Chapter 3: Impacts of 1.5°C of global warming on natural and human systems \(PDF\)](#), 2018, p245

⁶⁹ World Bank, Climate change could force 216 million people to migrate within their own countries by 2050, 13 September 2021

⁷⁰ As above

⁷¹ UNHCR, [Displaced on the frontlines of the climate emergency](#)

In many countries that host refugees, UNHCR notes there are limited natural resources, such as drinking water, and difficult living conditions can increase the risk of threat, conflict, and poverty.⁷²

Women and girls are judged most at risk. In 2022, UN Women published an [explainer on how gender inequality and climate change are interconnected](#).⁷³

2.9

Resettlement to a third country

The resettlement of refugees involves transferring people from a country in which they have sought protection to a third country. This is usually when large numbers of refugees are in a host country.⁷⁴ It is different to the process for seeking asylum as those who are chosen to be resettled are recognised as refugees before arriving in the new host country and do not need to go through the asylum process upon arrival.

Writing for reliefweb, a humanitarian website run by the UN, Benedicta Solf and Katherine Rehberg, of the Immigration and Refugee Program of Church World Service, highlighted several factors affecting resettlement. These include processing policies and varying procedures between countries, limited UNHCR funding, “challenging” political dynamics in host countries, the politicisation of immigration in countries that resettle the most refugees and the effect of Covid-19 restrictions on movement.⁷⁵

Refugees are mostly selected by UNHCR and transferred based on their vulnerability, such as their lives being at risk or having specialised health needs, with no hope of returning home.⁷⁶ According to the Refugee Council, 30% of refugees submitted for resettlement worldwide are survivors of violence and/or torture.⁷⁷ In 2022, there were 114,300 refugees resettled and around 339,300 returned to their countries of origin.⁷⁸

2.10

Repatriation and return

Refugees can request to be voluntarily repatriated to their country of origin. If the request is voluntary, and not forced, then the 1969 Convention Governing

⁷² UNHCR, [Climate change and disaster displacement](#)

⁷³ UN Women, [How gender inequality and climate change are interconnected](#), 28 February 2022

⁷⁴ Refugee Council, [Refugee resettlement facts](#)

⁷⁵ Benedicta Solf and Katherine Rehberg, [The Resettlement Gap: A Record Number of Global Refugees, but Few Are Resettled](#), reliefweb, 22 October 2021

⁷⁶ As above

⁷⁷ Benedicta Solf and Katherine Rehberg, [The Resettlement Gap: A Record Number of Global Refugees, but Few Are Resettled](#), reliefweb, 22 October 2021

⁷⁸ UNHCR, [Refugee Data Finder](#), updated 14 June 2023

the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa states how this should be done:

The sending State, in collaboration with the receiving State, must make adequate arrangements for the safe return of refugees who request repatriation, while the country of origin must facilitate their resettlement and grant them the full rights and privileges of nationals of the country, and subject them to the same obligations.⁷⁹

Potential return of Syrian refugees

In May 2023, Syria was reinstated into the Arab League, after being ejected following the outbreak of civil war in 2011. The move to normalise relations with President Bashar al-Asad comes as Middle Eastern countries are addressing the number of refugees in Syria's neighbouring states.⁸⁰

UK Home Office guidance states that while some people have returned to Syria without facing ill-treatment, evidence indicates that “the risk of arrest, detention and serious mistreatment on return, even after obtaining a security clearance or status settlement, remains.”⁸¹

The European Council on Foreign affairs, a pan-European think tank, has advocated for European states to focus on promoting the inclusions of Syrian refugees into the economies of their host countries and ensuring they can access rights, alongside considering the needs of host populations.

This, Kelly Petillo, the council's programme manager for the Middle East and North Africa, says will “help Syrian refugees live more fulfilled lives and reduce their motivation to reach European shores.”⁸²

Syrian refugees in Lebanon

In October 2022, concerns were raised after then-Lebanese President Michel Aoun announced that 15,000 Syrian refugees a month would be sent back to Syria.⁸³ The Government of Lebanon estimates it is hosting around 1.5 million Syrian refugees, while there were 805,326 registered with the UNHCR as of 31 March 2023.⁸⁴

The decision partly reflected the growing costs and hostile rhetoric towards hosting refugees, with a similar situation and plans put forward in Turkey. In October 2022, there were around 21,000 voluntary returns from Lebanon. The UNHCR says it has not been party to the negotiations between Lebanon and

⁷⁹ United Nations University Centre for Policy Research, [Safe Return and Voluntary Repatriation for Syrian Refugees from Lebanon: What Needs to Happen Next? \(PDF\)](#), February 2023, p6

⁸⁰ House of Commons Library, [Syria's civil war in 2023: Assad back in the Arab League](#)

⁸¹ UK Visas and Immigration, [Country profile and information note: returnees, Syria](#), June 2022

⁸² European Council on Foreign Relations, [From aid to inclusion: A better way to help Syrian refugees in Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan](#), 31 January 2023

⁸³ “Lebanon to begin returning refugees to Syria ‘in batches’”, Al-Jazeera, 12 October 2022

⁸⁴ UNHCR, [Eighth Regional Survey on Syrian Refugees' Perceptions and Intentions on Return to Syria](#), May 2023, p4

Syria, and NGOs have raised concerns that returning refugees will face abuse and arbitrary detention (both Lebanon and Syria reject this).⁸⁵

In May 2023, human rights organisation Amnesty International called on the Lebanese Government to stop deportations of Syrian refugees claiming that since April the armed forces had been carrying out “discriminatory raids” and immediate deportations.⁸⁶

Turkey and Jordan

Turkey hosts the largest number of Syrian refugees from the country's civil war: 3.7 million in mid-2022 and 660,000 Syrians are hosted in neighbouring Jordan.⁸⁷ Registered refugees constitute around 10% of the population of Jordan and 5% in Turkey.⁸⁸ Both countries have experienced a rise in anti-refugee sentiment with the situation becoming “strained”, according to the European Council on Foreign Relations.⁸⁹

In October 2022, the campaign group Human Rights Watch reported that “hundreds” of Syrian refugee men and boys in Turkey had been arrested, detained and deported to Syria between February and July 2022.⁹⁰ The group reported beatings and ill-treatment of refugees in Turkish detention centres and highlighted the use of EU funds to construct and maintain Turkish removal centres.

In response, Dr Savaş Ünlü, head of the Presidency for Migration Management in Turkey, said that Syrians returning from Turkey to Syria did so “voluntarily”.⁹¹

Human Rights Watch called on the EU to “acknowledge that Turkey does not meet its criteria for a safe third country and suspend its funding of migration detention and border controls until forced deportations cease”.⁹²

In 2021, Greece adopted a [Joint Ministerial Decision](#) stating that Turkey was a safe third country for asylum seekers from Syria, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Somalia.⁹³

In Jordan, 66% of Syrian refugees live below the poverty line and in 2022 there were calls for the international community to provide more funding to prevent a humanitarian crisis for refugees in the country.⁹⁴

⁸⁵ UN University, [Safe return and voluntary repatriation for Syrian refugees \[...\]](#), 2023, pp5, 12-13

⁸⁶ Amnesty International, [Lebanon: Halt summary deportations of Syrian refugees](#), 11 May 2023

⁸⁷ Statista, [Ranking of the largest Syrian refugee-hosting countries in 2022](#)

⁸⁸ European Council on Foreign Relations, [From aid to inclusion: A better way to help Syrian refugees in Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan](#), 31 January 2023

⁸⁹ As above

⁹⁰ Human Rights Watch, [Turkey: Hundreds of Refugees Deported to Syria](#), 24 October 2022

⁹¹ Directorate of Migration Management, [Letter from MoI on Syrian refugees \(PDF\)](#), 2022

⁹² Human Rights Watch, [Turkey: Hundreds of Refugees Deported to Syria](#), 24 October 2022

⁹³ As above

⁹⁴ European Commission, [Jordan](#), accessed November 2023; Relief web, [Jordan: Over 750,000 refugees risk facing a stifling humanitarian crisis due to lack of funding](#), 10 September 2022

In March 2023, Jordanian Foreign Minister Ayman Safadi announced the ‘Jordanian initiative to resolve the Syrian crisis’, described as “incentives in exchange for concessions”.⁹⁵ In July, Jordan’s Foreign Minister called for more international investment in Syria to “speed up refugee returns” and Assad has said investment in infrastructure and reconstruction is needed for refugees to return.⁹⁶

Views of Syrian refugees

In May 2023, the UNHCR conducted its eighth regional survey on [Syrian refugees’ perceptions and intentions on returning to Syria](#), based on those based in Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon and Jordan. It found that while most Syrian refugees hoped to one day return to Syria, and a sizeable number hoped to return in the next five years, only a small fraction indicated their intention to return in the next 12 months.⁹⁷

Denmark’s residence permits and the return of Syrian refugees

In Europe, the European Commission has noted that Denmark is “unique” in its “strong focus on the revocation of refugees’ residence permits” compared with other EU countries.⁹⁸ This follows legislative amendments to asylum practice by the Danish Government between 2015 and 2019. A [report by the Danish Institute for Human Rights](#) has observed that “residence permits are now granted with a view to refugees returning to their country of origin as soon as possible, rather to promoting their integration and long-term residence.”⁹⁹

In March 2023, Human Rights Watch responded to an announcement by the Danish Immigration Service that the Tartous and Latakia areas of government-controlled Syria were safe to return to.¹⁰⁰ Human Rights Watch said Syria was not safe and the decision means refugees from those areas may lose protections in Denmark and be “forced to return home”.

⁹⁵ Syriadirect.org, [‘Important but difficult’: Can Jordan’s initiative to resolve the Syrian crisis succeed?](#) 6 April 2023

⁹⁶ [Jordan’s foreign minister calls for investment into war-torn Syria to speed up refugee returns](#), Associated Press, 3 July 2023

⁹⁷ UNHCR, [Eighth Regional Survey on Syrian Refugees’ Perceptions and Intentions on Return to Syria](#), May 2023, p3

⁹⁸ European Commission website on integration, [Denmark: Changes to asylum practice and residence permits](#), 23 June 2022

⁹⁹ As above

¹⁰⁰ Human Rights Watch, [Syrian Refugees in Demark at Risk of Forced Return](#), 13 March 2023

3

UK international aid programmes and spending on refugees

Official Development Assistance is aid intended to promote the economic development and welfare of developing countries and is reported under Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) rules.

3.1

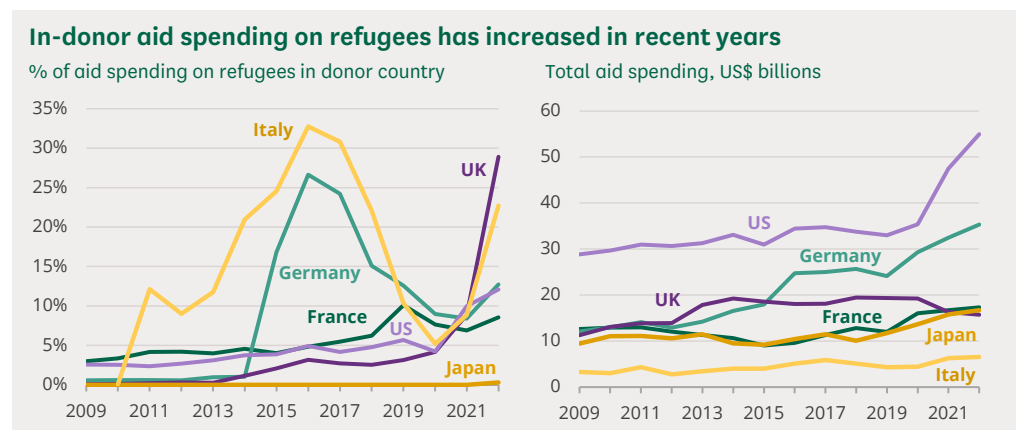
Spending on refugees in the UK

There are no official statistics on the amount that countries spend on aid for refugees because this is not one of the categories that the OECD uses to report aid spending.

Most spending is reported based on the problem it is trying to solve (for example, health, education, or humanitarian aid), rather than the specific people it is helping.

However, countries do report the amount that they spend on refugees within their own borders ('in-donor spending'), because such spending is reportable as aid for the refugee's first 12 months within the country.

As the chart on the left below shows, several [members of the OECD's Development Assistance Committee \(DAC\)](#), including the UK, have been spending increasing proportions of their aid budgets on this in recent years.



Note: The countries displayed are those which are in the top five among the OECD DAC for either total aid or aid spending on refugees in the donor country (or both) on average between 2009 and 2022.

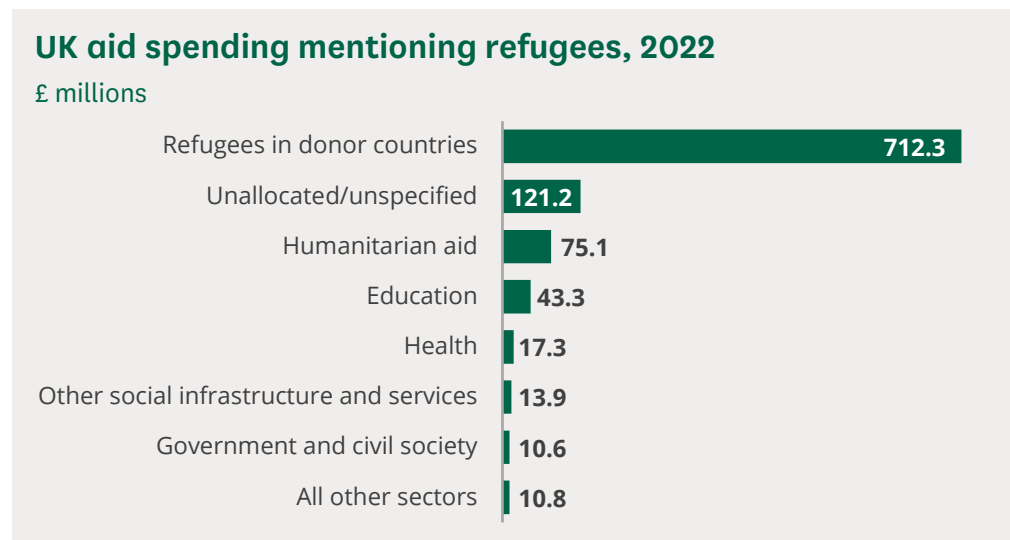
Source: OECD.Stat, [database DAC1](#), retrieved 12 June 2023

These two charts also show that although both the UK and other major donors are increasing their proportion of spending on refugees, in the UK this is within the context of a decrease in the overall aid budget. More information on this is available in the Library's research briefing [The UK aid budget and support for refugees in the UK in 2022/23](#).

3.2

Spending on refugees abroad

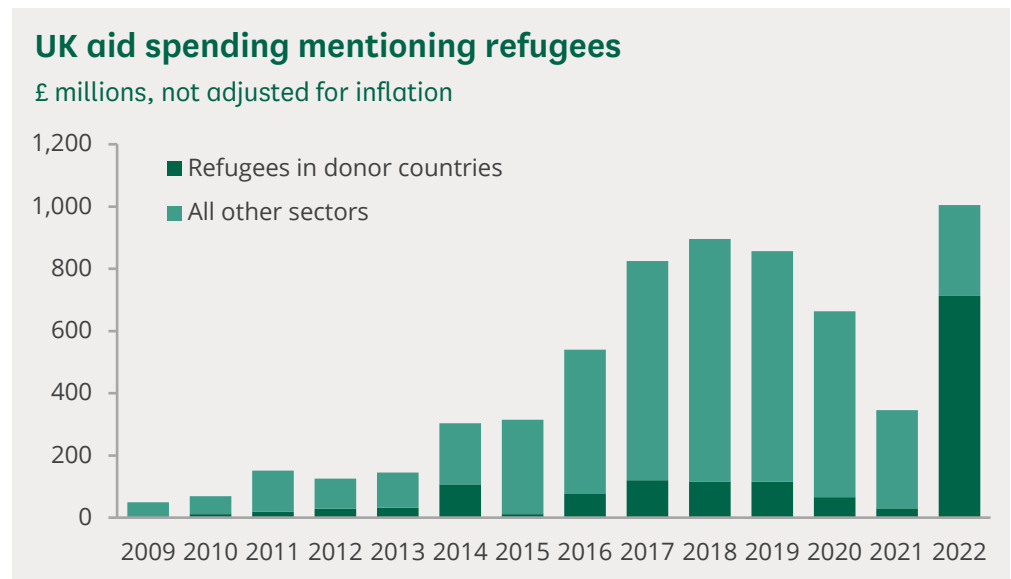
We can also get a rough idea of the amount that the UK spends on refugees in other countries by looking at projects which mention the word “refugee” in their descriptions in the published data. In 2022, the most recent year for which we have data, spending on these projects can be broken down as shown in the chart below.



Source: FCDO, [Statistics on International Development: final UK aid spend 2021](#), 23 November 2022

The largest amounts spent on refugees outside the UK were for “unallocated/unspecified” aid, all of which came from contributions to multilateral agencies such as the World Food Programme and UNHCR, and humanitarian aid.

Of the spending in 2022 on projects mentioning “refugees”, 71% was for refugees within the UK. As the chart below shows, this is by far the largest proportion in recent years. The amounts spent outside the UK have been decreasing since 2019, but the amount spent within the UK rose sharply in 2022 because of refugees from Afghanistan and Ukraine.



Source: FCDO, [Statistics on International Development](#), data underlying SID, multiple years

3.3

Aid spending raised in Parliament

Refugee camps in Jordan

In November 2022, David Rutley, Parliamentary Under Secretary for the FCDO responded to a question from Labour's Navendu Mishra asking what recent assessment had been made of the effectiveness of UK aid for refugee camps in Jordan.

David Rutley said that since 2016, the UK had allocated over £150 million in humanitarian support to refugees in Jordan. He said this had supported 450,000 refugees with cash assistance for basic living costs and more than 150,000 refugee children with access to formal education.¹⁰¹

He said the UK was committed to increasing the self-reliance of refugees and vulnerable communities by working with Jordan, “moving towards” aligning UK and international support with systems in Jordan and to refugees being more included in Jordan's economy.

Refugee camps in Yemen, Syria, and South Sudan

Government action to ensure delivery of aid to refugee camps in Yemen, Syria and South Sudan was questioned by Jim Shannon (DUP) in July 2020.¹⁰²

In response, James Cleverly, then an FCDO minister, said that in Yemen, the Government had provided £10.8 million to UNHCR to assist refugees and IDPs

¹⁰¹ PQ 74964 [on [Jordan: Refugees](#)], 8 November 2022

¹⁰² PQ 77623 [on [Migration Camps: Humanitarian Aid](#)], 21 July 2020

since 2017, including 5,000 children and more than 3,000 survivors of gender-based violence.¹⁰³

In South Sudan, he said the UK works with international and non-governmental organisations and funds several refugee support programmes, including preventing the spread of Covid-19, ensuring access to education and to life-saving supplies.

In Syria, the minister said the 6.1 million internally displaced people were most in need of humanitarian support and that the Government was supporting Palestinian refugees there, including £36 million to the UN's programme for Palestinian refugees in Syria.

Further reading: [UK aid to the West Bank and Gaza Strip](#)

UK aid and Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh

As of 30 September 2023, there were more than 965,000 Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh, many of whom are women and children.¹⁰⁴ Almost all these refugees are in refugee camps in the Cox's Bazar area, the world's largest refugee settlement.

In 2023, the UN's Joint Response Plan for the Rohingya humanitarian crisis said US\$67.4 million was needed to support the needs of Rohingya refugees and forcibly displaced Myanmar nationals, rising to US\$808.5 million when including the needs of the host communities.¹⁰⁵

As of October 2023, the UK had provided £370 million to support Rohingya refugees and host communities in Bangladesh since 2017, when violence broke out in Rakhine State, Myanmar, and nearly £30 million to support Rohingya and other Muslim minorities in Rakhine State.¹⁰⁶

In October 2023, the UK pledged £4.5 million to support "vital humanitarian services" for Rohingya refugees in these camps.¹⁰⁷

Also in 2023, because of a fall in donor funding, the World Food Programme reduced the value of food vouchers it provides to Rohingya refugees from US\$12 to US\$8.¹⁰⁸

Between 2017/18 and 2020/21, bilateral aid was highest in 2019/20, at £112.4 million.¹⁰⁹ As of 6 March 2023, the [UK had provided £15 million to the Rohingya response](#) during 2022/23.¹¹⁰ Labour's Sarah Champion, Chair of the

¹⁰³ PQ 77623 [on [Migration Camps: Humanitarian Aid](#)], 21 July 2020

¹⁰⁴ UNHCR, [Operational Data Portal](#), Bangladesh, 30 September 2023

¹⁰⁵ Reliefweb, [2023 Joint Response Plan: Rohingya Humanitarian Crisis \(January to December 2023\)](#), 7 March 2023, p12

¹⁰⁶ Gov.uk, [UK announces further assistance for Rohingya people in Bangladesh](#), 17 October 2023

¹⁰⁷ As above

¹⁰⁸ World Food Programme, [Bangladesh](#)

¹⁰⁹ PQ 3829 [on [Bangladesh: Rohingya](#)], 24 May 2021

¹¹⁰ PQ 15391 [on [Bangladesh: Rohingya](#)], 27 February 2023

International Development Committee, said: “Reducing our support also reduces our diplomatic influence with the Government of Bangladesh, and therefore our ability to call for the human rights of the Rohingya to be respected and upheld.”¹¹¹

Government approach to aid in Jordan, Lebanon and to Palestinian refugees

Contributing to the International Development Committee’s inquiry into UK aid for refugee host countries, the FCDO provided [evidence on the UK’s approach with a focus on Jordan, Lebanon and on Palestinian refugees](#) in July 2022.¹¹²

Because of a humanitarian and economic crisis affecting the whole of Lebanon, not just the refugees it hosts, the FCDO said its development assistance was going to refugees and Lebanese communities in need.

In the medium to long term, the FCDO said it will ensure its approach to aid is aligned with Lebanon’s socio-economic context and, resources permitting, invest in a regional response to the Syrian refugee crisis to support host countries. It will also work with the international community and international finance institutions on macro-economic reforms to support Lebanon’s economy.

Similarly, in Jordan the FCDO said in the short term it will support vulnerable Jordanian and refugee communities through emergency cash transfer programmes (for Jordanians) and through a new UK education programme (for both communities). Medium to longer term, the FCDO said it will build better alignment “between the policies and services provided by the Government of Jordan to vulnerable Jordanians, and those delivered by the UN and NGOs”.

Regarding Palestinian refugees, the FCDO said in the medium to longer term it will ensure UK policy takes account of the changing needs of Palestinian refugees and the socio-economic situation in Lebanon, Jordan, the Occupied Palestinian Territories and in Syria.

The FCDO said that multi-purpose cash assistance remains “a global ‘best buy’ in achieving value for money and empowering people with the dignity of choice.”

For more read the Library briefing: [UK aid to the West Bank and Gaza Strip: FAQs](#).

¹¹¹ [HC Deb, Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh, 2 May 2023, col 68](#)

¹¹² FCDO, [Written evidence submitted by the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office](#), July 2022

4 UK aid strategies and their effectiveness

4.1 UK international development strategy, 2022

A [new 10-year international development strategy](#) was published in 2022 with four priorities: reliable investment and trade, empowering women and girls, humanitarian assistance, and climate change, biodiversity, and global health.¹¹³

The strategy includes aims to provide “life-saving humanitarian assistance and work to prevent the worst forms of human suffering” alongside “prioritising funding” and being a “global leader in driving a more effective international response to humanitarian crises”.¹¹⁴

Regarding refugees, the strategy states the UK will “uphold international humanitarian, human rights and refugee law” and meet international obligations to protect refugees and asylum seekers, including through legal resettlement routes to the UK.¹¹⁵

On humanitarian aid, the Government pledged £3 billion over three years, alongside using diplomacy to “push the international system” to act before conflicts and natural disasters. It said it would use finance and insurance mechanisms to “better manage and anticipate humanitarian emergencies” and invest in science and technology solutions, such as satellite imagery.¹¹⁶

4.2 2023 international development white paper

In its November 2023 white paper, [International development in a contested world: ending extreme poverty and tackling climate change](#) (PDF), the UK Government pledged a “re-energised international development agenda” which “sets out revolutionary approach to tackling world hunger”.

Policy on refugees

The white paper noted that forced migration and displacement is growing and highlights illegal migration as a “strain on communities”, while

¹¹³ House of Commons Library, [The UK's aid strategy 2022](#), 30 June 2022

¹¹⁴ FCDO, [The UK government's strategy for international development](#), updated 29 August 2023

¹¹⁵ As above, paragraph 22.

¹¹⁶ As above, paragraph 19.

increasing the “fiscal burden on transit and destination states” and placing migrants at risk of dangerous journeys and falling victim to criminal activities.¹¹⁷

It pledged to “deepen” work with [Education Cannot Wait](#), a global fund for education in crises, to ensure vulnerable children, including refugees and displaced girls can access good education.¹¹⁸

With a focus on irregular and illegal migration, it envisages “safe, orderly and legal migration” by 2030, with international efforts having reduced incentives for migrants to take dangerous journeys, including on small boats:

Globally, partnerships will unlock the human capital of forcibly displaced people, bringing skills, connections, and finance to local economies and host communities. While we work towards durable solutions, education and training will provide opportunities for refugees in protracted crises, including those in camps.¹¹⁹

There are six points in the white paper aimed at addressing the causes of irregular migration, including development interventions, climate adaptation, social protection and education in the countries that migrants and displaced people come from, and more international cooperation on managing migration and dismantling criminal groups.¹²⁰

There are four points on forced displacement, including increased global action and calls for refugees and displaced people to be included in national programmes, and improved access to education, particularly for girls who are refugees or displaced.¹²¹

The [Chair of the International Development Committee, Sarah Champion](#), said the white paper was “highly ambitious” and “obviously directed at achieving impact for years”. However, she said that the UK is going to be “running to catch up with the impact of [its] own aid budget cuts”.¹²²

4.3

Review of UK aid for irregular migration

In 2017 the Independent Commission for Aid Impact (ICAI) reviewed the UK Government’s aid response to irregular migration in the central Mediterranean. At the time of the review, the government was working on migration objectives relating to aid programmes in Libya and Nigeria.

¹¹⁷ FCDO, [International development in a contested world: ending extreme poverty and tackling climate change](#) (PDF), November 2023, p20

¹¹⁸ As above, p88

¹¹⁹ As above, p106

¹²⁰ As above, p107

¹²¹ As above, p108

¹²² International Development Committee, [Chair comments on the FCDO global development white paper](#), 21 November 2023

The ICAI found the risk of UK aid causing “unintended harm to vulnerable migrants” had been inadequately assessed and said: “This risk was particularly pronounced in Libya, where the UK government provides support to the coastguard and detention authorities.”¹²³

In response, the government said it disagreed with the assertion that its funding to Libya did not take the principle of ‘do no harm’ into account: “...we carry out careful assessments of the likely impact of programming before agreeing to provide aid,” it said.¹²⁴

4.4

International Development Committee report on UK aid for refugee host countries

In May 2023 the UK International Development Committee reported on UK aid for refugee host countries.¹²⁵

The committee scrutinised whether UK aid spending is “responsive to the needs of refugees” and whether it provides “effective, sustainable support for host countries” in protracted crises.¹²⁶

It also looked for opportunities for the international community to develop “effective, long-term strategies” when crises start and found that current practices “fail both refugees and the countries that host them.”¹²⁷

Lower UK aid funding has reduced the UK's influence

The committee noted that despite the Global Compact, responses to refugee crises “often degenerate”, citing donor fatigue and reduced funding.¹²⁸

It said that since the UK's aid had reduced to 0.5% of gross national income aid to countries that host large numbers of Syrian refugees, such as Jordan and Lebanon, had reduced. In Lebanon the UK's aid budget fell from £149 million in 2019 to £22 million in 2022, while in Jordan it decreased from £131 million in 2019 to £42 million in 2022.¹²⁹

The committee cited written evidence from UNHCR that this had “reduced confidence” among host governments that the international community

¹²³ ICAI, [The UK's aid response to irregular migration in the central Mediterranean](#), 10 March 2017

¹²⁴ Department for International Development, [Government Management response to ICAI review on the UK's aid response to irregular migration in the Central Mediterranean](#), 19 April 2017

¹²⁵ International Development Committee, [UK aid for refugee host countries – Report Summary](#), 26 May 2023

¹²⁶ International Development Committee, [UK aid for refugee host countries](#), 26 May 2023

¹²⁷ As above

¹²⁸ As above

¹²⁹ FCDO, [Final UK aid spend 2022](#), April 2024, table A4b.

would continue to provide long-term support to Syrian refugees in host countries.¹³⁰

The UNHCR said that despite the UK paying a “key leadership role” in responding to Syrian displacement, including encouraging increased funding and international cooperation in the region, more recent aid reductions had reduced the UK’s influence.¹³¹

It argued that the reductions had affected the well-being and protection of refugees, fed into “anti-refugee hostility” and may have increased the onward movement of refugees from host countries.¹³²

Recommendations ahead of the global forum

Occurring every four years, the Global Refugee Forum is described as the world’s “largest international gathering on refugees”.¹³³ It supports efforts to implement the Global Compact on Refugees.

The first iteration was held in 2019 and in 2023 it was held in Switzerland. Ahead of the forum, in 2023 the International Development Committee made recommendations to the FCDO:

- The UK Government develop “effective, measurable pledges for action” with the forum’s members.
- The UK Government should ensure it has fulfilled [the UK’s commitments under the Global Refugee Compact](#) to “maintain international credibility on refugee issues”.
- The UK Government should use the forum to advocate humanitarian response plans that assist people based on their vulnerability rather than their immigration status. Responses to displacement should also adopt a ‘trauma-sensitive’ approach and provide psychological support.
- The UK Government should use the forum to push for increased multi-year investment in the institutional capacities of local and national responders, particularly in fragile contexts. Best practice should be based on individual contexts.
- The global forum should be used to share lessons from current protracted crises and the UK Government should advocate for a global strategy to provide “predictable support” for host countries while diplomatic solutions should address the causes of a crisis.

¹³⁰ International Development Committee, [UK aid for refugee host countries](#), p8

¹³¹ UNHCR, [Written evidence submitted by the UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency \(PDF\)](#), 18 August 2022, points 8 to 13

¹³² UNHCR, [Written evidence submitted by the UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency \(PDF\)](#), 18 August 2022, point 13

¹³³ UNHCR, [Global Refugee Forum 2023](#)

- The strategy should detail how the international community will support countries hosting refugees to move from the initial response to a crisis to a “long-term development approach” that includes access to education, healthcare, water, nutrition, sanitation and hygiene, social security and essential infrastructure.
- How to incorporate refugees into national systems for essential services should also be in the strategy, rather than separate systems being set up. Reliable, long-term financing must also be available to host countries.
- There must be a strategic objective within UK foreign and development policy, and diplomacy, to facilitate safe and dignified routes for refugees to return to their countries when it is safe to do so.

Government response, August 2023

The government agreed or partially agreed to the committee's recommendations.

The government also highlighted “wider changes in the donor landscape” supported by the UK.¹³⁴

It said the UK had been the largest donor to the International Development Association (part of the World Bank Group) from 2017 to 2020 when £2.5 billion came from the UK, and in 2021 to 2022 with £3.1 billion. Some of this funding went to the [World Bank's Window for Host Communities and Refugees](#).

Alongside resources to support refugees in host countries, the government said that it:

Continue[s] to advocate with refugee host countries the benefits of allowing refugees to access to rights (e.g., freedom of movement and work) and services (e.g., education and health).¹³⁵

¹³⁴ International Development Committee, [UK aid for refugee host countries: Government response to the Committee's Eighth Report of Session 2022-23](#), 20 October 2023

¹³⁵ As above, paragraph 7.

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