



4th JDC Research Conference on Forced Displacement

Conference report
June 4-6, 2026 - Bangkok, Thailand



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Executive Summary

Nearly [118 million people](#) were forcibly displaced globally at the end of 2025. [Seven in ten refugees](#) continue to live in protracted displacement — not for months, but years or decades, in conditions shaped by decisions that are too rarely grounded in evidence.

The [4th Joint Data Center \(JDC\) Research Conference on Forced Displacement](#) was held in Bangkok from June 4 to 6, 2026. Organized by the JDC in collaboration with the World Bank, UNHCR, and Chulalongkorn University, it brought together 131 in-person participants and 480 online registrants from 24 countries. Participants included researchers, policymakers, government representatives, international organizations, development partners, and academics. Over three days, they examined what some of the evidence says about forced displacement and where the gaps remain. It took place at a moment when humanitarian budgets are shrinking while displacement numbers are not.

When resources are constrained and needs are growing, the cost of acting on weak evidence rises. Decisions about where to invest, when to transition from aid, whether to promote return, and how to design legal frameworks all have consequences for millions of people. In this context, evidence matters because policy and financing choices need to be sharper, more targeted, and better grounded in the realities facing displaced people and host communities. Governments and partners need to understand which conditions enable self-reliance, what shapes returns and reintegration, how displacement affects host communities, and where data gaps still limit effective policy and programming.

The conference was organized around five areas where the evidence base is both most consequential and most incomplete: self-reliance and economic inclusion; returns and reintegration; statistical inclusion; methodological innovation; and the translation of evidence into policy and operations.

Several messages emerged.



Self-reliance depends on systems

Legal access to work is the entry point, not the destination. Freedom of movement, documentation, financial inclusion, functioning markets, private sector engagement, services, and links to national and local institutions all shape whether displaced people can rebuild their lives and rely less on external assistance over time. Whether people can become self-reliant also depends on the strength of local economies and services in the communities where displaced people live; this means support for host communities is part of the same, not a separate agenda.



Returns and reintegration require better data

Return is not just a movement from one place to another. It is shaped by security, livelihoods, services, social networks, access to cash, documentation, housing, and local conditions. Aggregate return numbers alone are not enough. Governments and partners also need to understand what people return to, whether conditions allow them to rebuild their lives, and what support is needed for reintegration to last.



Statistical inclusion is foundational

If forcibly displaced and stateless people are missing from national data systems, they are less likely to be reflected in national policy, planning, financing, and service delivery. Inclusion makes displaced populations visible in the data used for decisions and supports national ownership by making displacement part of regular statistical production—not a separate, one-off, or parallel exercise managed by external actors. It also helps governments and partners collectively understand the wider effects of displacement, including where local systems are under pressure, where opportunities are emerging, and what support is needed for both displaced people and the communities they live alongside.



Methodological innovation is most useful when it closes real evidence gaps

Better data is needed where displaced populations are mobile, hard to sample, or missing from national datasets; where return and reintegration are difficult to monitor; and where conditions change between survey rounds. Administrative data, forecasting, machine learning, geospatial tools, satellite imagery, longitudinal and panel surveys, and experimental approaches can help reduce the cost of data collection and analysis and provide timely insights for policy and operational decisions.

The wider message from Bangkok was unambiguous: **better evidence is only as good as the decisions it shapes**. With constrained resources and growing needs, the question is not whether to invest in data and analysis — it is whether the evidence being generated reaches the people making financing and policy choices in time to matter.



In an environment of shrinking budgets and rising needs, better data is not a luxury. It is how we target scarce resources and hold ourselves accountable.

Aissatou Dicko, Head, World Bank–UNHCR Joint Data Center on Forced Displacement



Conference Overview

The conference brought together 131 participants in Bangkok, and 480 people registered online. Participants included representatives from government, academia, international organizations, development partners, and research institutions. They joined from 24 countries, reflecting broad interest in how better data, evidence, and statistical inclusion can inform policy and operational decisions on forced displacement.

The program combined six academic sessions, two keynote lectures, two policy panels, and a strategic dialogue. Together, they focused on five themes: self-reliance and economic inclusion; returns and reintegration; statistical inclusion; methodological innovation; and policy and operational relevance. Within these areas, sessions explored more specific questions, including the effects of aid reductions, the development impacts of inclusion, and health and well-being in displacement settings.

The conference program is included in **Annex 1**.

The call for papers attracted 100 submissions. A Scientific Committee, comprising representatives from the JDC, the World Bank, and Chulalongkorn University, reviewed submissions against criteria including quality, originality, academic rigor, and policy relevance. Eighteen papers were selected for inclusion in the program, with 17 presented during the conference.

Presentations from the conference are available on the [conference webpage](#).

The conference reached audiences beyond those attending in person. [Livestreamed sessions](#) generated more than 1,900 views between June 4 and 11, while the [conference webpage](#) attracted more than 2,300 visitors during conference week. Content was shared through JDC and partner channels, with speakers and researchers extending reach through their own networks.

A snapshot of participation, institutions represented, participant nationalities, and visibility beyond the room is included in the Conference at a Glance infographic in **Annex 2**.

Evidence and Insights

The papers, keynote lectures, policy panels, and strategic dialogue covered a wide range of contexts, including Bangladesh, Colombia, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Kenya, Rwanda, Somalia, Türkiye, and Uganda. They looked across populations, methods, and policy questions.

Across the discussions, several points came through clearly: progress is possible, policy choices matter, evidence gaps remain, and context shapes outcomes.



When you find yourself in a situation of displacement, what you want is to be able to build a future. And being self-reliant is an important element of building a future.

Raouf Mazou, Assistant High Commissioner for Operations, UNHCR



Self-reliance and economic inclusion

Self-reliance and economic inclusion are increasingly important as aid budgets come under pressure amid protracted displacement, and the central finding from Bangkok on self-reliance is this: no single intervention produces it. Self-reliance is a systems outcome. Legal access to work, freedom of movement, documentation, financial inclusion, job matching, business development services, private sector engagement, and links to functioning local markets and institutions — all of these need to be in place, at least partially, for economic inclusion to take hold. Remove one, and the others lose their effect

[UNHCR's 50 by 35 target](#) sets the ambition: supporting more than half of the world's aid-reliant refugees in long-term displacement in low- and middle-income countries—nearly 8 million people—to rebuild their lives by 2035. The evidence from this conference makes clear how demanding that goal is, and how much depends on getting the enabling conditions right.

Thailand provided a most immediate example of where legal frameworks are shifting. In August 2025, the Royal Thai Government adopted a resolution allowing registered refugees from Myanmar living in nine camps along the Thai-Myanmar border to access legal employment. The shift is significant, but implementation depends on practical steps: clear procedures, documentation, employer engagement, skills development and matching, and actual access to the labor market. The resolution opens a door; whether people can walk through it is still to be determined – and the JDC is well-positioned to track whether it does.



Better evidence supports better policy – for displaced people, for host communities, and for governments seeking sustainable solutions.

Melinda Good, Division Director for Thailand and Myanmar, World Bank



Other findings pointed in the same direction. Support can help people build livelihoods, [start businesses](#), [strengthen networks](#), and make [better choices for their households](#), but outcomes depend heavily on context. Programs work best when they are connected to real opportunities – markets, finance, skills, services, and institutions – rather than creating parallel structures that exist alongside local markets but do not link to them.

The effects of aid reductions were reflected in [evidence from Uganda](#), where assistance was reduced before adequate self-reliance conditions were in place – households did not transition; they fell back. Poverty deepened, household debt rose, and children were pulled out of school. The finding is not a case against reducing aid. It is a case against reducing it to timelines that are disconnected from what people actually have access to. Sequencing matters as much as policy design.

Self-reliance also depends on the local economy around displaced people. Support for refugees and support for host communities cannot be separated. [Data on refugee inclusion](#) pointed to wider development impacts, with more supportive policy approaches linked to stronger local economic activity and greater satisfaction with local services and infrastructure. [In Kenya](#), support among host communities weakened when households lost access to services, employment, or other benefits linked to the aid economy. The interdependence is real and measurable.

[Evidence from Colombia](#) highlighted mental health as an important part of understanding persistent poverty among displaced populations. Trauma and mental health can affect behavior, beliefs, skills, income, human capital accumulation, and early childhood development. This is not a peripheral finding. If the systems required for self-reliance are in place but people cannot engage with them — because of trauma, depression, or fractured agency — then the systems alone are not sufficient. The evidence base on forced displacement has largely not accounted for this. It should.



When we speak about data, we are not only speaking about evidence, but also about people's access to services, dignity, and inclusion.

Hai Kyung Jun, Regional Director for Asia and Pacific, UNHCR



Returns and reintegration

As with self-reliance, returns and reintegration depend on conditions, not only on movement. Return figures show that people have crossed a border or moved from one location to another. They do not show whether people can stay, find work, access services, secure documentation, recover assets, or rebuild social and economic ties.

This matters because return numbers can create a false sense of progress. A rise in returns may suggest movement in the right direction, but it does not show whether return is voluntary, sustainable, or supported by the conditions people need to rebuild their lives.

[Analysis of Syrian refugees returning from Jordan](#) showed why more detailed data is needed. By combining UNHCR administrative data, verified border-crossing records, and cash assistance and skills data, the analysis looked at actual returns rather than intentions. It showed that return decisions were shaped by geography of origin, welfare levels, cash assistance, and economic integration, with liquidity playing an important role for the poorest households. The implication: return decisions are economic decisions, and policies that do not account for household financial conditions will not predict or support them effectively.

These questions also apply beyond formal returns. [Research on Rohingya refugees](#) relocated from Cox's Bazar to Bhasan Char showed that movement to a new location does not automatically mean better outcomes, it worsened them. Relocated households reported lower well-being across every dimension measured: food consumption, physical and mental health, labor outcomes, and access to assistance and services. And the costs were not lower; per capita service delivery on Bhasan Char was approximately three times more expensive than in Cox's Bazar. Relocation as a policy response to concentrated displacement is not cost-free, and it is not automatically in the interest of the people being moved. The evidence should inform how such decisions are made and evaluated.



Our objective is not simply to help people return, but to help them return to communities where they can rebuild their lives with dignity, access opportunities, and contribute to economic development.

Ozong Agborsangaya-Fiteu, Chief Operations Officer and Transition Support Facility Coordinator, African Development Bank

Findings from [Iraq](#) and Burundi also showed that movement during conflict is shaped by local conditions and household circumstances. In Iraq, internally displaced people (IDPs) were concentrated close to conflict, with movement declining with distance and over time, and people tending to relocate to populated areas near main roads. In Burundi, exposure to violence increased adult and child migration, while violence experienced by the household shaped marriage-related migration among unmarried women, pointing to gendered dimensions of displacement that aggregate data cannot capture.

The policy implication is clear, but it requires specificity. Better movement and return data can help governments and partners understand who moves, who does not, what people return to, and what support is needed for reintegration to last. Investing in longitudinal return monitoring is not a methodological preference. It is what distinguishes a durable solution from a statistic.

Statistical inclusion

[Statistical inclusion](#) is no longer just a technical issue. It is a policy imperative and established good practice. It helps ensure that forcibly displaced and stateless people are visible in national data and evidence used to make decisions. Progress on this is real and worth building on. More than 25 countries now explicitly include forcibly displaced people in national statistical systems. The [Global Refugee Forum](#) (GRF) has also built momentum, with more than [100 pledges made by countries and other stakeholders](#) to include forcibly displaced and stateless people in national data production. Internationally recommended standards developed through [EGRISS](#) provide governments, national statistical offices, and partners with a common framework for making these commitments operational.

The next challenge is sustainability. Surveys remain an important entry point, but inclusion cannot depend only on individual exercises. Administrative data systems, civil registration, vital statistics, sector ministries, and wider government data systems all matter. The aim is to embed displacement in regular national data systems, rather than treat it as a separate, parallel exercise.

The case for statistical inclusion is ultimately about accountability. When displaced people appear in national statistics, they can appear in national plans and budgets. When they do not, the burden falls on the humanitarian system — indefinitely. Making this shift requires political will as much as technical capacity, and the JDC's role is to make the evidence for that shift impossible to ignore.

Methodological innovation

Methodological innovation matters because evidence gaps remain large. Displaced populations can be mobile, hard to sample, or missing from national datasets. Returns and reintegration are difficult to monitor, and data can arrive too late for policy and operational decisions.

The innovation is not always the method itself. In many cases, it is how different sources are combined or applied to displacement questions. Regular surveys remain essential, but other data sources can help answer questions they are not designed to capture on their own.

UNHCR records and verified border-crossing data were used to examine [actual returns from Jordan to Syria](#), rather than relying only on stated intentions. [Panel surveys compared outcomes for Rohingya refugees](#) across different locations in Bangladesh. [Geo-referenced conflict and displacement data](#) helped explain movement during war in Iraq, including the role of distance, time, roads, and nearby population centers. [Satellite imagery and machine-learning methods](#) were tested to estimate socioeconomic conditions for refugee and host communities in South Sudan between survey rounds.

These approaches are useful when they close real evidence gaps. They can make data collection and analysis timelier and more cost-effective, produce more comparable evidence, and help inform planning, targeting, and resource allocation in contexts where regular data collection is difficult.



Return is not a single event, but a process.

Erin Felton, Senior Operations Coordination Specialist, Asian Development Bank

Policy and operational relevance

Data only matters when it helps decisions get made. In displacement settings, that means evidence that enables governments and partners to shape policy, design programs, guide financing, target limited resources, and identify gaps that would otherwise be missed.

The conference showed what this looks like in practice. In Colombia, regular data collection on Venezuelan displaced populations contributed to changes in legal recognition, opening access to work, services, and financial systems for millions of people. In Iraq, analysis combining data on forcibly displaced populations and social protection informed a fairer, more integrated proxy means test for cash transfers, helping an integrated system reach people it had previously excluded. In Pakistan and Zambia, data produced jointly with national statistical offices helped shape investments for refugee inclusion — making the case for financing that would not otherwise have been made. In Indonesia, work on civil registration and vital statistics revealed that more than three million children were not recognized in the system. That is not just a measurement exercise. It is evidence that changes what governments and partners must respond to.

The pattern across these cases is consistent: data changed what was visible, and what was visible changed what was decided. For self-reliance, data can help identify whether the conditions for economic inclusion are in place: legal access to work, mobility, documentation, finance, services, skills, and labor market links — or whether a program is operating on assumptions that local conditions do not support. For returns and reintegration, data can show more than how many people moved. It can help identify who returns, who does not, what people return to, and what support may be needed for reintegration to last.

The wider message is that data and analysis should not stop at publication. The test is whether the analysis reaches someone making a decision in time to matter, and in a form they can use. It should identify what is changing, who is affected, where systems are working, where gaps remain, and what needs to happen next for displaced people and host communities.

From evidence to action

The conference set out a clear direction for the work ahead. Better evidence now needs to move more consistently into policy, financing, and implementation, and sharper investments are needed in the gaps that remain.

Self-reliance demands a system investment not a program. UNHCR's 50 by 35 target — supporting nearly 8 million aid-reliant refugees to rebuild their lives by 2035 — is achievable only if the enabling conditions are in place: legal access to work, freedom of movement, financial inclusion, job creation, private sector engagement, social protection, education, health care, and local economic development. Evidence from Uganda showed what happens when the timeline precedes the conditions: households do not transition; they fall back. The lesson is not to slow ambition. It is to sequence investment around what people actually need access to.

Returns and reintegration require evidence that goes beyond headline numbers. Governments and partners need better data on who returns, who does not, what makes reintegration sustainable, and how support should adapt as contexts change.

Statistical inclusion should become routine and is urgent, not aspirational. With humanitarian budgets shrinking and needs growing, governments and partners have no margin for misallocating resources. That is precisely what happens when forcibly displaced and stateless people are absent from national data systems. The progress made — 25 countries, 100-plus GRF pledges, EGRIS standards — creates a foundation. The next phase is making inclusion routine: embedded in civil registration, administrative data, sector ministry systems, and national budget processes. Not a project. A practice.

Sustainable approaches depend on understanding the effects of displacement on both displaced people and the communities they live alongside. Better evidence can show how services, labor markets, and local economies are affected; how policy choices shape access to work, services, and assistance; and where refugees and other displaced people are able to contribute as workers, entrepreneurs, and members of local economies.

Innovation should stay practical. Administrative data, longitudinal surveys, geospatial tools, machine learning, and forecasting can extend the reach of analysis — especially for mobile populations and in contexts where conditions change between survey rounds — and support earlier action. The test is always the same: does the method answer a question that decision-makers actually have for people and places that regular data systems do not reach?

A shared agenda

Partnerships are central to this agenda. Researchers, policymakers, humanitarian actors, development partners, national governments, and donors each bring different questions, different constraints, and different proximity to the decisions that evidence is meant to inform. The JDC's value is precisely at this intersection: connecting what researchers produce to what operations and policy require.

For the World Bank, UNHCR, and donor partners, the alignment is increasingly practical, not just rhetorical. Protracted displacement, constrained resources, and growing pressure on host countries make the demand for timely, comparable, and actionable evidence more acute, not less. The overlap between UNHCR's self-reliance agenda and the World Bank's Fragility, Conflict and Violence (FCV) strategy is real and operable: jobs, services, self-reliance, economic inclusion, and data systems and financing decisions that hold displaced people and host communities in view at the same time.

The JDC exists to make that connection work. Not by producing evidence in parallel to operations, but by ensuring that what is learned reaches those who can act on it — and that what practitioners and policymakers need to know shapes what gets studied next. Bangkok demonstrated that the field is ready for harder questions. The task now is to make sure the answers get to the right people.

Annexes

Annex 1: Conference program (abridged version)



4th JDC Research Conference on Forced Displacement

June 4-6, 2026 | Chatrium Grand Bangkok, Thailand

Program

Day 1: Thursday, June 4	Day 2: Friday, June 5	Day 3: Saturday, June 6
09:00 – 09:45 Opening and welcome session	09:00 – 09:15 Recap of Day 1	09:00 – 09:15 Recap of Day 2
09:45 – 11:00 First keynote lecture	09:15 – 11:00 Policy panel 2: Self-reliance	09:15 – 10:45 Sixth academic session: Health and childhood in displacement settings
Coffee Break (11:00 – 11:30)	Coffee Break (11:00 – 11:30)	Coffee Break (10:45 – 11:00)
11:30 – 13:00 First academic session: Effects of aid and aid cuts	11:30 – 13:00 Fourth academic session: Development and economic inclusion	11:00 – 12:45 Second keynote lecture
Lunch (13:00 – 14:00)	Lunch (13:00 – 14:15)	12:45 – 13:00 Closing session
14:00 – 15:30 Second academic session: Socioeconomic effects of forced displacement in host countries	14:15 – 15:30 Strategic dialogue: Statistical inclusion	Lunch 13:00
Coffee Break (15:30 – 16:00)	Coffee Break (15:30 – 16:00)	
16:00 – 17:30 Third academic session: Movements of refugees, IDPs, and returnees	16:00 – 17:30 Fifth academic session: Conflict, mobility, and household effects	
17:30 – 18:45 Policy panel 1: Returns	End of Day 2	
Reception (18:45)		

Scan to access the full program:





Annex 2: Conference at a Glance



Participation



In-person participants
131



Online participants
480



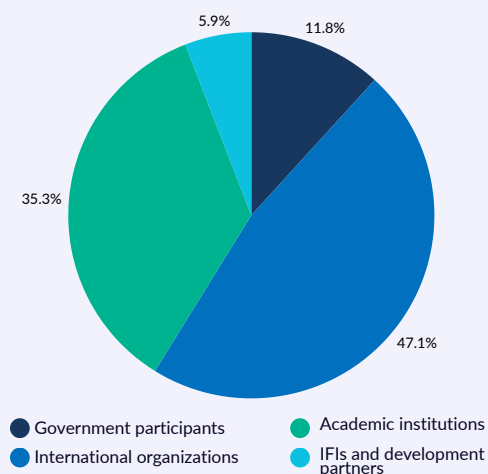
Countries represented
24



Institutions represented
68



Institutions represented by type



Reach and Visibility

Youtube



- Total views **1,911**
- Livestream views **649**
- Replay views **1,262**
- Watch time **308 hours**

Website



- Website users **3,200**
- Page visitors **2,302**

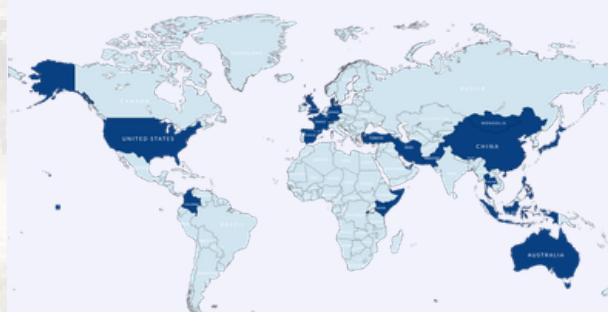


LinkedIn

- Impressions **10,183**
- Reactions **321**
- Engagement rate **6.1%**
- New followers **170**



Countries represented



- Australia
- Belgium
- China
- Colombia
- Denmark
- France
- Germany
- Hong Kong
- Indonesia
- Iran
- Japan
- Kenya
- Mongolia
- Pakistan
- Philippines
- Rwanda
- Somalia
- Spain
- Switzerland
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Cover photo: Refugee camp Ban Mai Nai Soi. Training of WEAVE NGO
of weaving with Karenni women refugees from Myanmar in February
2025

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