

Strengthening protection and solutions in the context of mixed movements of refugees and migrants

Mixed movements of refugees and migrants¹ pose significant, multifaceted challenges for governments, the people themselves and communities in countries of origin, asylum, transit and destination.

While refugees have distinct needs for international protection, as recognized in international refugee law, they often use the same routes as migrants and face similar vulnerabilities and risks along the way, such as falling prey to traffickers and smugglers. **For far too many people, these journeys result in increased vulnerability, trauma or loss of life.**

Many individuals involved in mixed movements, regardless of their motivation, use the asylum channel as the main available means to obtain legal stay, causing asylum systems to become backlogged and overwhelmed along the route. This negatively affects those in genuine need of international protection while complicating State efforts to run effective asylum systems.

The perception of chaotic spontaneous arrivals, regardless of numbers, has raised public concern, fuelled in some contexts by anti-foreigner, anti-refugee rhetoric and populist narratives. Such anxiety may be exacerbated by the **sense of a lack of control, order and fairness**, including when those not in need of international protection, or without legal stay options, cannot be returned to their countries of origin in a timely, safe and dignified manner.

As noted by the High Commissioner for Refugees “mixed flows of refugees moving alongside migrants along routes fraught with risk, like the scourge of human trafficking, represent one of the biggest challenges we must face.” ([opening statement to ExCom](#) on 9 October 2023).

Shifting towards more humane and effective responses

Responding more effectively and predictably to the challenges of mixed movements requires a broader, [whole-of-route approach](#). Applying innovative approaches to engage States to ensure international protection and solutions for refugees, while upholding rights and creating opportunities for migrants, along key routes, is critical.

At the core of this approach is a shift towards more humane and effective responses, concrete actions to counter smuggling and trafficking, and delivering better outcomes for those on the move, affected communities and States alike.

To this end, States should put measures in place to ensure that:

- **all people on the move are treated with dignity and their rights are respected.**
- **international protection is ensured for refugees all along the routes**, including in countries closer to places of origin. This should include ensuring access to rights,

¹ *Mixed movements: The cross-border movement of people, generally in an irregular manner, involving individuals and groups who travel alongside each other, using similar routes and means of transport or facilitators, but for different reasons. People travelling as part of mixed movements have different needs and profiles and may include asylum-seekers, refugees, victims of trafficking, unaccompanied or separated children, stateless persons, and migrants (including migrants in irregular situations or migrants in vulnerable situations).* [UNHCR master Glossary of terms](#).

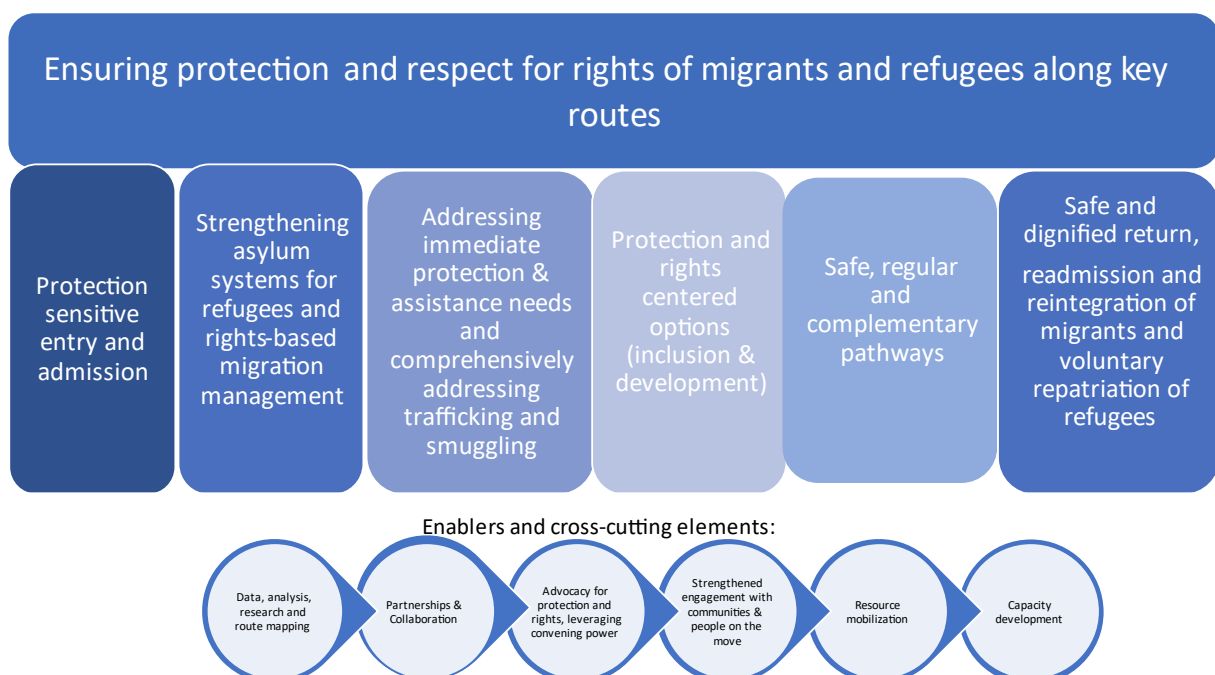
government services and livelihood opportunities, strengthening basic services to the benefit of host communities as well as refugees, and fostering social cohesion.

- **regular pathways for safe, orderly and regular migration are accessible and viable, and new pathways are established.** Regular pathways can include family reunification, sponsorship, humanitarian admission programmes, skills and education pathways and labour mobility opportunities. These should be equally accessible for refugees, complement access to asylum and resettlement and should be facilitated with travel and other documentation.
- **the swift, safe, dignified return and readmission to their country of origin for those who do not have international protection needs** or other legal grounds for stay, and for whom regular opportunities for migration or labour mobility are not applicable. This requires, among other measures, support to include those returned in their home countries' economies and communities.
- **the root causes of displacement are addressed**, including by ending conflict, strengthening good governance, ensuring respect for human rights and genuine efforts to fulfil the commitments to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

To advance these efforts, the route-based approach proposes a set of comprehensive, targeted and coordinated interventions to be taken by States, UNHCR, IOM, other UN agencies, civil society partners, migrant and refugee organizations and other stakeholders, along main routes in countries of origin, asylum, transit and destination. The interventions seek to reduce dangerous journeys and related human suffering and offer effective, rights-based alternatives to externalization proposals and expulsion practices, while **helping States to manage the challenges around irregular movements, including return, in line with their international obligations.**

Six pillars to guide effective, targeted interventions

Six pillars have been identified to help guide these interventions, together with six enabling areas.



Interventions in relation to these pillars and enablers, along routes, aim to:

Save lives and reduce harm along the routes by ensuring **rescue at sea and land, protection-sensitive entry and admission procedures at borders, safe disembarkation and humanitarian assistance to refugees and migrants to address immediate needs**, as well as **providing information about, and referral of individuals, to appropriate channels**, including for those in vulnerable situations such as children or victims of trafficking (pillar 1 and 3).

Strengthen the tools, systems and cooperation to strengthen asylum capacity and effectively manage mixed movements, including early identification and referral of refugees and migrants and those with specific needs, such as people who have suffered trauma, into appropriate channels (pillar 2). States have the primary responsibility for providing international protection, strengthening and ensuring rights-based asylum and migration management, which afford international protection to refugees as early as possible. Lawful arrangements among States can ease pressures on asylum systems while contributing to responsibility sharing.

Create alternatives to dangerous journeys all along the routes by providing international protection, with rights and access to services and economic opportunities, as early as possible and by **setting up and managing safe, orderly and regular pathways for refugees and migrants**, which complement resettlement, as a viable alternative to dangerous routes. Ensure that refugees and migrants have documentation to access these (pillar 4 and 5).

Ensure fairness in asylum and migration processes. Fair, efficient national asylum systems associated with prompt, humane, dignified returns, including voluntary return, and lawful migration channels, will help reduce dangerous journeys and asylum applications by those not in need of international protection (pillar 6).

Enhanced data collection and capacity for analysis will be key to facilitating evidence-based decision-making, as well as to meeting critical needs along the key routes, and will inform outreach and two-way engagement with people involved in mixed movement situations, as well as their own communities at home or abroad and host communities.

Ways forward

The approach requires a **shift towards a people-centered approach, political commitments and willingness, including through funding where relevant, and to explore innovative ways of managing mixed movements of refugees and migrants.**

The approach foresees cooperation and responsibility sharing and builds on the ambition of the New York Declaration, the [Global Compact on Refugees](#) and the [Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration](#). It also engages with, and complements, important State-led and regional

processes², and will require new, flexible fora to bring States together on concrete solutions for various categories of people engaged in mixed movements along specific routes.

Acknowledging that there are no quick fixes or one-size-fits-all solutions to the challenges posed by mixed movements, UNHCR will initially work on a few selected routes, such as the Central Mediterranean route, the north-bound route towards the United States, and movements towards Southern Africa.

Each route which is addressed through this approach will require differentiated measures, with the development and implementation of specific strategies and opportunities for collaboration with States, communities and partners.

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² Such as the [Valletta Plan of Action](#), [The Khartoum Process](#), [The Rabat Process](#), [The Rome Process](#), [The Bali Process](#), [The Los Angeles Declaration on Migration and Protection Action Plan](#), and the [IGAD and EAC Munyonyo Declaration on Durable Solutions for Refugees in the East and Horn of Africa](#).