

Assisting and protecting vulnerable migrants along migratory trails

Unpacking the “route-based approach”¹

General principles

Reminder: who is a migrant? *“In line with the IFRC’s 2009 Policy on Migration, ‘migrants’ are persons who leave or flee their habitual residence to go to new places – usually abroad – to seek opportunities or safer and better prospects. This includes migrant workers, stateless migrants, migrants deemed irregular by public authorities, as well as asylum seekers and refugees².”*

The [IFRC’s 2009 Policy on Migration \(2009\)](#) – hereafter “2009 Policy” – makes it clear that our approach to migration is **based on needs, informed by rights and bound to the Movement’s Fundamental Principles³**.

In order to uphold this approach, the 2009 Policy expresses a strong commitment for the IFRC and National Societies to **work along migratory trails** (Principle 7)⁴. According to the 2009 Policy:

*The Movement is in a unique position to help bridge the gaps of assistance and protection for migrants. National Societies in countries along the migratory trails will work together to optimise their humanitarian action, including the restoration of family links. This requires a **focus on situations and conditions in which migrants all along their journey are especially susceptible to risks**. National Societies may sensitize potential migrants about risks of migration, but must not seek to encourage, prevent or dissuade migration.*

The 2009 Policy clarifies that certain requirements need to be met in order for the IFRC and National Societies to provide effective humanitarian assistance and protection to vulnerable migrants along migratory trails. In particular, the 2009 Policy encourages the IFRC and National Societies to:

1. Understand the conditions along migratory trails through systematic **information collection and exchange** about the conditions and risks for migrants in the countries concerned;
2. Strengthen their capacity to **reach migrants in transit** and identify their requirements for support;
3. Take action, with the ICRC, for **restoring the family links** of migrants;
4. Be cognizant of the challenges facing by migrants in irregular situations, including immigration detention, and **support the right of each migrant** to be considered on an individual basis;

¹ This document draws on recent IFRC experience with assisting and protecting migrants along migratory routes, most notably in the Sahel region (“AMiRA programme”) and in Latin America (“Mariposa Monarca” programme). This document is based on discussions held with Movement partners during the 2020 Global Migration Task Force. It is intended as a companion document to the IFRC Humanitarian Service Points toolbox.

² IFRC 2018-2022 Global Strategy on Migration. Note that some individuals may fall into more than one of these categories.

³ According to the 2009 Policy, “the approach of the Movement to migration is strictly humanitarian and based on the recognition of each migrant’s individuality and aspirations. It focuses on the needs, vulnerabilities and potentials of migrants, whatever their legal status, type, or category”.

⁴ The terms “route” and “trail” are used interchangeably in IFRC documents on migration.

5. **Raise the awareness** of potential migrants concerning the risks of migration, particularly irregular migration, while avoiding becoming instruments of governmental policies aimed at preventing migration as a whole.

The route-based approach serves the purpose of contributing to fulfilling the Movement humanitarian mandate in the field of migration. It is not an end in itself. If correctly understood, the route-based approach can add value to many areas of the Movement's migration work, including through stronger cooperation between National Societies in countries of departure and countries of return when it comes to assisting returnees (Principle 8 of the 2009 Policy)⁵.

Global strategy

The [IFRC Global Strategy on migration \(2018-2022\)](#) builds on the principles outlined above and commits the IFRC and National Societies to take concrete actions, so that *“at all stages of their journeys, and irrespective of their legal status, migrants find the IFRC ready to respond to their needs, enhance their resilience, and advocate for their rights”*. Some of these actions are specifically grounded in a route-based approach. In particular:

- The Global Strategy calls for **stronger IFRC action along migratory trails** to reduce the risks that migrants face and address migrants' needs through assistance, protection and advocacy. This should build on the unique, community-level presence of National Societies along migratory trails, as well as their privileged position as humanitarian auxiliaries to public authorities;
- Outcome 1 under Strategic Aim 1 (*Save lives and ensure dignity*) states that *“migrants, including migrants in an irregular situation, have meaningful access to assistance, information and referrals to other services **at key points on migration routes** or in areas with large populations of migrants”*;
- Concerning **RFL activities**, the Global Strategy focuses on the risk of family separation along migratory trails. It encourages National Societies to develop regional and trans-regional links, including systems that allow for the **confidential and safe sharing of information along migratory routes**. The ICRC and its Central Tracing Agency will continue to play a leading and coordinating role in this field and support the Family Links Network;
- As part of Enabling Action 1 (*Build strong National Societies*), the Global Strategy commits *“National Societies [to] develop **cooperation with sister NS on migratory trails** in order to increase shared analysis and opportunities for aligned (or joint, where feasible) programming and funding opportunities”*. This calls for a reinforced **capacity of NS branches at key points of migratory trails**, and for a stronger **role of NS networks** (APNM, Sahel+, PERCO, etc.).

[IFRC Strategy 2030](#) identifies Migration and Identity as one of five global challenges requiring stronger IFRC responses. Strategy 2030 reinforces the commitments to a route-based approach, by insisting on principled humanitarian assistance, protection, and cross-border coordination⁶:

⁵ It should be stressed that, when working with returnees, National Societies are only concerned with the returnees' own needs and interests. At all times, they must maintain their impartiality, neutrality and independence. National Societies are under no obligation, as auxiliaries to public authorities or otherwise, to have a role in coercive acts or migration control. Source: 2009 Migration Policy.

⁶ Strategy 2030 is aligned to major humanitarian and development frameworks, including **the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration** (A/RES/73/195). The Global Compact formulates non-binding commitments for States to improve cooperation on international migration. Some of these commitments specifically refer to the importance of taking into account migration routes when it comes to: providing accessible information and referrals, reviewing the impact of migration policies on dangerous transit routes, facilitating migrants' communication with their families, and addressing human trafficking and smuggling.

*We will **expand our support** to migrants along major migratory routes and cycles to ensure that they are able to meet their humanitarian needs through essential services, irrespective of their legal status.*

*We will ensure a strong focus on **protection** for migrants who are particularly vulnerable. We will scale up our work to integrate programmes across inclusion and social cohesion, recognising that these issues are interlinked to the well-being of all people both in home and host communities.*

*We will invest in **research and new transformative partnerships** that can help us to better meet the evolving needs of people on the move.*

*We will improve how we work **across borders**, allowing for more connected programmes and information systems between countries, National Societies and Movement components, and along migration routes.*

Unpacking the route-based approach

As stated in the Global Strategy, “*working along migratory trails, across borders and often with mobile populations requires more coherent ways of working, and increased partnership, within and outside the Movement*”. To do so, it is important to clarify internally the operational significance of working along migratory trails/routes.

What is a migration route?

At the most basic level, a migration route can be understood in terms of a fast-evolving and non-linear **geographical space** shared by migrants⁷. Persons who move along such routes may include undocumented migrants, refugees and others in need of protection. When they travel together, they tend to share similar modes of transport and face similar vulnerabilities along the journey, including the risk of trafficking⁸. Irregular cross-border movements are often facilitated by smugglers.

Some migratory routes contribute to urban migration from rural areas to large cities, other routes map longer cross-border movements stretching entire countries and regions (such as migratory routes

⁷ Note that the idea of a “migration route” is a simplification of reality. Migration journeys are not linear: migrants tend to move independently or in uncoordinated small groups following a multiplicity of trajectories that hardly resemble an organised and recognisable “route”. It is generally towards the end of migratory journeys, as migrants reach the main migration hubs and approach the main destination areas, that specific routes become more visible. This observation however does not subtract value to the reflections on the route-based approach contained in this document, as far as they encourage the IFRC and National Societies to be more sophisticated and principled in their analysis of migratory contexts and migrants’ vulnerabilities, and to adapt their responses accordingly. In this respect, the IFRC and National Societies should be aware that specific migration routes (such as the “Central Mediterranean Route” from Sub-Saharan Africa to Southern Europe) may feature prominently in the agenda of donor governments, sometimes at the expense of other lesser-known routes and often conflating humanitarian and migration policy objectives.

⁸ The concepts of “mixed movements” or “mixed migration” are sometimes used to refer to specific situations where asylum seekers and refugees move alongside other people whose reasons for moving are different and not related to international protection. These concepts were introduced to better cater to the different needs and profiles of the persons involved. Note however that “mixed movements” or “mixed migration” are not catch-all terms for all types of human migration.

across the Sahel or in Central America). In pastoralist areas and cross-border areas, migratory routes tend to follow traditional patterns of human mobility. In some contexts, the “route” is limited to the points of departure and arrival, for example in cases where migrants reach their destination by airplane without transiting through intermediate locations. In these cases, the journey itself may not raise specific humanitarian issues, but migrants may still find themselves in vulnerable situations pre-departure and, more often, upon arrival.

Importantly, routes may evolve as a consequence of changing security contexts, natural or human-made disasters and, more frequently, as a result of new **migratory and border management policies**⁹. Political insecurity and violence may render some routes too dangerous, while disasters and public health emergencies (such as the COVID-19 pandemic) may result in borders closing down overnight, leaving migrants stranded and more vulnerable. Climate change may likewise have long-term consequences on migration routes, increasing outmigration from the worst-affected areas and rendering certain routes more dangerous.

In addition, the concept of migration route should be linked to a **particular stage in the journey of an individual migrant**. Persons on the move do not simply occupy a space along a certain geographical route. Rather, they find themselves at certain geographical locations during different phases of their journey for a variety of reasons. A migrant may find him/herself in transit, stuck at a border point, or recently arrived in a new country. This range of individual circumstances entails specific vulnerabilities that need to be addressed in a truly route-based migration approach. Such route-related factors compound pre-existing vulnerabilities linked to a migrant’s profile (nationality, age, gender, etc.) and status (asylum seeker, refugee, victim of trafficking, migrant in irregular situations, etc.).

It is important to note that **migrants’ vulnerabilities, as well as their status, may change along the route and during the migratory journey**. A migrant may, for example, become a victim of trafficking at an intermediate step of his/her migratory journey.

The concept of migration route therefore binds together three interlinked elements:

- A fast-evolving non-linear **geographical space**;
- The impact of the **policy, security and environmental context**;
- A **human dimension** linked to the particular situation and characteristics of an individual migrant at a certain stage of the journey.

These different elements need to be accounted for in order to identify and assist vulnerable migrants at “key points” along migratory routes.

What is a key point along a migration route?

As illustrated above, the IFRC migration approach finds its justification in migrants’ unaddressed humanitarian needs and vulnerabilities. The IFRC is not a specialised migration actor and should not aim to cover all spaces along a migration route. Internal policy and strategic documents clearly refer to “key points” along migration routes. The question is how such points are identified. The answer is necessarily grounded in an analysis of humanitarian and protection concerns and vulnerabilities in a given migratory context.

⁹ This was for example the case of Niger, where a restrictive anti-smuggling legislation was introduced in 2015. Although aimed at smugglers, the new legislation has increased the vulnerability of migrants, refugees and asylum-seekers to exploitation, abuse, and detention during already dangerous journeys through the desert.

Usually, the **points of a route** (geographical space) that raise the most relevant concerns are: border points, checkpoints, migration hubs, hard-to-access areas and arrival points. Conversely, the most dangerous **stages of a migrants' journey** (human dimension) generally comprise: transit, border-crossing, desert and sea-crossing, contacts between migrants and law enforcement or military forces, arrival at destination, and return. These tentative lists of locations and migratory stages are of course purely indicative and should never substitute an accurate context-specific analysis.

Following their humanitarian mandate and their focus on vulnerabilities, the IFRC and National Societies should therefore be positioned and ready to provide protection and assistance where the greater needs arise. In order to do so effectively, National Societies should reinforce their capacities to: (i) collect and analyse relevant information; (ii) update the analysis (and the response) whenever required by changes in the context; and (iii) prioritise areas of intervention based on proven humanitarian needs.

How does the route-based approach inform the vulnerability analysis and the operational response?

It should be clear at this stage that the route-based approach is ancillary to the overarching vulnerability-based approach guiding the action of the IFRC and National Societies towards migrants. An analysis of migration routes and needs emerging at key points along such routes is nevertheless key for a better understanding of the humanitarian aspects of migration and for informing a more effective response. Furthermore, evidence-based humanitarian diplomacy initiatives in favour of migrants would likewise be significantly strengthened.

A route-based approach encourages the IFRC and National Societies to:

- Raise the bar of their **vulnerability analysis**, by taking into account:
 - The geographical dimension of migratory routes, including the impact of the socio-political context (security operations, migration policies, border restrictions, etc.);
 - The human dimension of migratory route, including the specific vulnerabilities facing migrants at different stages of their journey (in transit, on arrival, upon return, etc.);
 - The policy, security and environmental factors influencing migration routes;
 - Vulnerability factors linked to migrants' status and to changes of status along the route (undocumented migrants, victims of trafficking, refugees, etc.);
 - Traditional vulnerability factors linked to individual profiles (nationality, age, gender, diversity, etc.);
 - Specific needs arising at different points along migratory routes, including RFL needs (in coordination with the ICRC).
- Improve their ability to identify and prioritise **key points** along migratory routes;
- Strengthen their **access** to hard-to-reach locations and to hard-to-reach categories of people on the move (depending on context, this may include victims of trafficking, migrants in transit, etc.). The implementation of mobile initiatives and Humanitarian Service Points could be considered as a measure to strengthen access;
- Regularly **monitor and re-assess** the situation along the route (including how and why such routes change and evolve), adapting their programmes accordingly;
- Engage **external actors**, service providers and partners along migratory routes, in order to ensure migrants' access to essential services;
- Improve **cross-border coordination** with other National Societies located downstream or upstream along a given migration route, in order to:
 - Regularly exchange information, including assessments and analyses, information on available services, and alerts concerning new arrivals;

- Map service providers and RCRC branches across the entire migratory route;
- Provide relevant information to migrants concerning protection risks and available services across the entire migratory route;
- Establish cross-border referral mechanisms with due consideration to data protection and confidentiality concerns;
- Elaborate joint advocacy strategies and messages.
- Implement **Humanitarian Service Points** at key points along migratory routes.

Concept statement. *The IFRC understands the route-based concept as an important complement to the overarching migration approach of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, which is based on needs, informed by rights and bound to the Movement's Fundamental Principles. A route-based approach informs a deeper understanding of the humanitarian and protection needs of migrants by analysing the vulnerabilities arising from the geographical and human dimensions of migration routes, relevant contextual elements, and their interactions with vulnerabilities factors related to a migrant's profile and status. This allows the IFRC and National Societies to better assist and protect vulnerable migrants and to adapt their interventions to fast-evolving operational realities.*

What can National Societies do to implement a Route-based approach?

Effective communication

The ability to provide coordinated support along the migratory route requires an effective and efficient flow of information at key points:

- Within the countries, between NS staff and volunteers, as well as between the NS and local stakeholders, local authorities and service providers;
- Between NS along the same migration route;
- Between the NS and migrants, their associations or representatives in different countries. Reaching out to more vulnerable migrants can be a challenge, as trust takes time to build.

The flow of information can be hampered by a lack of data solutions for cross-border systems; the instability of the national contexts is also a constraint. As national policies change, national bureaucracies can stop collaboration or refuse to share information; as migration routes change, relationships built along one route may become obsolete and new ones may need building.

Confidentiality, or the risk of breaking confidentiality can also be a block to the flow of information. However, the IFRC global strategy on migration “*encourages NS to develop regional and trans-regional links including systems that allow for confidential and safe sharing of information along the route.*”

Flexibility

The dynamic situation within each country context requires the capacity to adapt services (what is offered, as well as how it is distributed) at short notice. As the route changes, new needs may arise in new places, demanding an adapted response. National and regional systems need to have the capacity to be able to ensure the delivery of services regardless of these changes.

Coordination and cooperation

Concerned National Societies should build upon existing network, such as PERCO, APMN and Sahel+, in order to improve cross-border coordination along migratory trails. Such networks can play an

important role in reinforcing operational responses, harmonising regional approaches, developing advocacy initiatives and engaging regional partners.

Moreover, whenever needed, National Societies should seek technical support and advice from the IFRC and the ICRC, as well as from Movement migration-related exchange platforms and initiatives (Global Migration Task Force, Migration Leadership Group and Migration Lab).

Migration assessments and strategies

A solid understanding of the local context is essential in order to implement a route-based approach and set up Humanitarian Service Points. To this end, it is important to build the capacities of staff and volunteers, enabling them to identify priority needs, key points along the route and protection risks. This process should be accompanied by an overall reinforcement of local branches and Humanitarian Service Points located along migratory routes. As indicated in the IFRC Global Strategy on Migration (2018-2022), working effectively along migratory routes calls for a stronger strategic approach and the integration of migration into National Societies strategies and plans.