UNHCR
The UN Refugee Agency

Southern Africa and Western Indian Ocean Routes

Route Based Approach

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The UN Refugee Agency

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Situation Overview

Mixed movements of refugees and asylum seekers across Southern Africa remain a complex and persistent challenge, marked by diverse routes, profiles, drivers and intentions spanning countries of origin, transit, and destination. The region has seen a sharp rise in such movements, with a 152 per cent increase compared to 2024. As of June 2025, over 100,000 refugees and asylum seekers were recorded as part of these flows. Two primary corridors, the Southern Route and the Western Indian Ocean Route, continue to serve as key pathways. Since 2024, notable progress has been achieved in implementing the route-based approach (RteBA) in Southern Africa, aimed at addressing these challenges through a whole-of-society response. The challenges encompass a lack of comprehensive and individual data on mixed movements; complex and multifaceted drivers, including conflict, human rights violations, and political upheavals; and combined protection risks, including smuggling, human trafficking, refoulement, detention, disappearances, and deaths. The Southern Africa Regional Bureau developed a regional strategy (2024 - 2027) for the RteBA in collaboration with country operations and UNHCR headquarters.

Geographic, historical & political context

Southern Africa remains a dynamic yet challenging, humanitarian region, shaped by a complex interplay of protracted displacement, recurring crises, and evolving protection needs. By mid-2025, the region hosted over 11 million forcibly displaced individuals and returnees. Displacement has been primarily driven by conflict, political instability, and the growing impact of climate-related hazards. These interconnected factors have intensified both internal and cross-border movements, resulting in a displacement landscape of increasing scope, scale, and complexity.

Of the total displaced population, approximately 1.1 million people are classified as refugees, asylum- seekers, stateless individuals, returnees, and others of concern, underscoring the region's diverse legal and protection situations. The Democratic Republic of the Congo lies at the centre of this crisis, both as a host country for asylum-seekers and as the primary source of refugees and IDPs. The Democratic Republic of the Congo currently hosts almost 87 per cent of all forcibly displaced individuals in Southern Africa, while simultaneously generating significant displacement within the region and across the continent due to ongoing insecurity, particularly in its eastern provinces. Additionally, as of December 2024, Southern Africa accounted for 72 per cent of undocumented refugees and asylum-seekers lacking legally recognized identity documents.

Despite sustained efforts, the overall protection environment remains fragile. Armed conflict continues to drive internal displacement in several countries, while others experience rising returns, secondary movements, and climate-induced displacement. By June 2025, more than 1.3 million people had been displaced due to climate shocks, underscoring the urgent need to integrate climate risk into protection and response planning. In total, over 10.6 million individuals were displaced internally or had returned as IDPs.

Access to territory and fair asylum procedures remain a significant challenge in several Southern African countries. By December 2024, 66 individuals were subjected to refoulement across five countries: Madagascar (49 individuals), Zambia (7), Mozambique (4), Seychelles (4), and South Africa (2), with all incidents involving removal from national territory. The majority of those affected were from conflict-affected countries, including Somalia (47), the Democratic Republic of the Congo (8), Angola (4), Iraq (2), and Afghanistan (2). These incidents underscore systemic weaknesses in national asylum systems, the inconsistent application of the principle of non-refoulement, and the pressing need for policy reform, capacity-building, and enhanced regional cooperation. Thus, this challenging protection environment contributes to the onward movement of refugees and asylum seekers in the region.

Mixed and onward movements further complicate the protection landscape. From January to June 2025, more than 100,000 refugees and asylum-seekers were engaged in mixed movement flows, primarily through South Africa, Zambia, and Malawi, which remain key transit and destination hubs. These populations face heightened risks, including trafficking and exploitation, and limited access to essential services. To address these challenges, the region continues to implement a route-based protection strategy under the 2024 - 2027 roadmap, aimed at improving data systems, strengthening protection and solutions, as well as enhancing cross-border collaboration.

From the political side, in June 2025, the recommendations of the high-level technical meeting on the route-based approach co-convened by The Southern African Development Community (SADC) and UNHCR in High-Level Meeting recommendations on mixed movements and the Route-Based Approach (RteBA) from December 2024 were officially adopted by all Member States during the SADC Statutory Meeting (held on 23 - 27 June), reflecting strengthened political commitment. This milestone paves the way for operationalizing the route-based approach (RteBA), including through strategic partnerships with other international agencies to inform evidence-based planning, as well as regional research, holistic and human-centered responses, and capacity-building initiatives.

Numbers at a glance

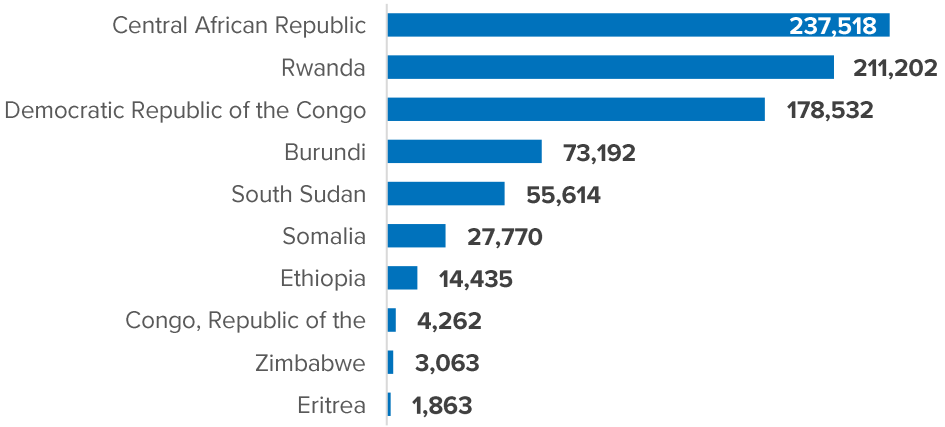
As of June 2025

10.3 million forcibly displaced individuals and returnees 9.2 million people are internally displaced persons

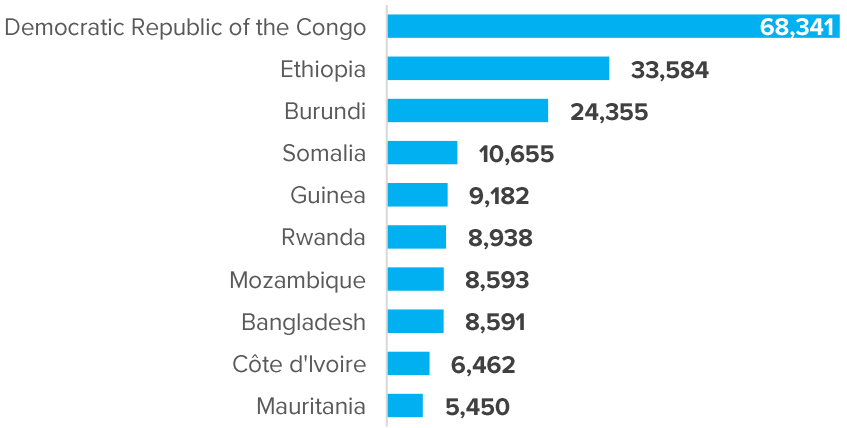
1 million people are classified as refugees, asylum- seekers, stateless individuals, returnees, and others of concern

The top ten nationalities of refugees and asylum-seekers in the Southern Africa region.

Top ten nationalities of refugees in the Southern Africa region



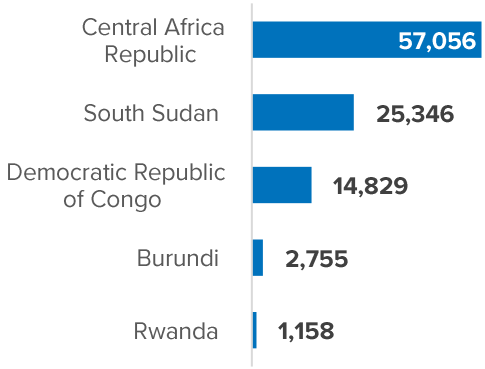
Top ten nationalities of asylum-seekers in the Southern Africa region



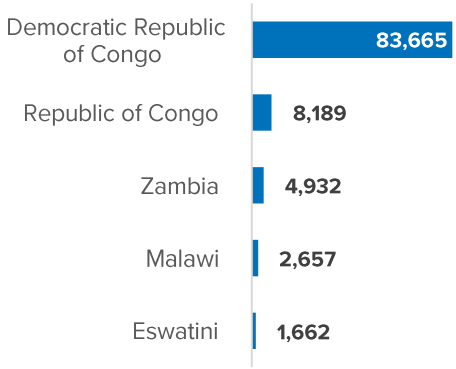
Over 100,000 refugees and asylum seekers were involved in mixed movements. On top of these, 2,124 families (103,476 covering refugees and asylum-seekers) were surveyed and revealed the following:

Women and children represented 71 per cent of this group, highlighting their heightened vulnerability. Alarmingly, 37 per cent of respondents reported experiencing serious protection incidents during their journeys. Finally, onward movements in the region account for 2 per cent. All movements were by land, with very few by sea and air.

Top five nationalities of refugees involved in the current displacement



Top five countries of asylum



Top five nationalities of refugees and migrants' involvement in the mixed movements (community-led data collection) [1]

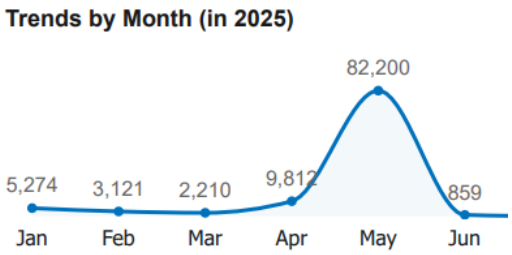
Democratic Republic of the Congo	**1,040** respondents
Burundi	**742** respondents
Rwanda	**256** respondents
Congo	**24** respondents
Somalia	**16** respondents

[1] *Other migrants are travelling along the same routes, and their information is not currently recorded in UNHCR systems*

Population Flows

Where are the areas of origin, displacement, transit, destination and return?

A significant challenge in addressing mixed movements in Southern Africa is the lack of detailed, disaggregated protection data - including age, gender, and vulnerability categories such as unaccompanied children, women at risk, and persons with disabilities. While qualitative studies, such as those by the Mixed Migration Center[2], provide useful insights into protection risks, smuggling, and trafficking, critical gaps remain. UNHCR, as the mandated protection and solutions agency, continues to face difficulties in mapping protection concerns across countries of origin, transit, and destination due to insufficient regional data. Information on drivers of movement, routes, risks and perpetrators, intentions, and drivers for onward movement is especially limited.



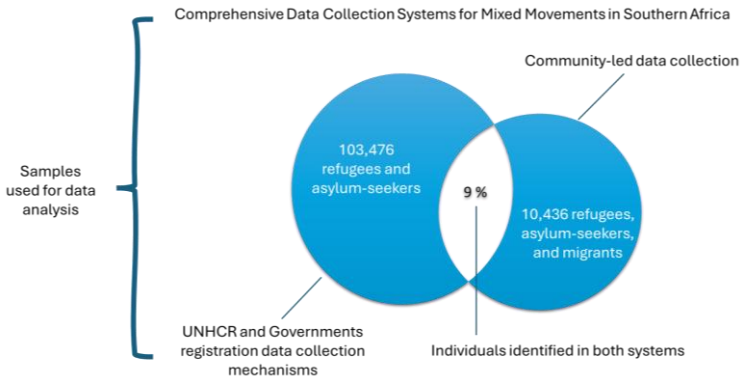
To address these gaps, robust quantitative and qualitative data collection efforts were rolled out, operating through two complementary regional systems:

The first system is integrated into UNHCR and government registration mechanisms, using tools such as PRIMES and national databases. During the first half of 2025, we identified 103,476 refugees and asylum-seekers involved in mixed movements, of whom 88,046 remained unregistered. The data gathered using this method does not encompass all aspects of movement. It is primarily intended for monitoring trends in displacement, as well as the points of origin and destination. The analysis of the key figures shows that refugees and asylum seekers from the Central African Republic, South Sudan, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo are the top three nationalities involved in displacement. The top three destinations for these displaced individuals are the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the Republic of Congo, and Zambia. This method is supplemented by community-led data collection, which provides a more comprehensive view of movements, including origin, displacement, transit, destination, incidents, and return.

The second system is community-led and captures information on individuals on the move. Over the same period, it covered 2,124 families (10,436 individuals).

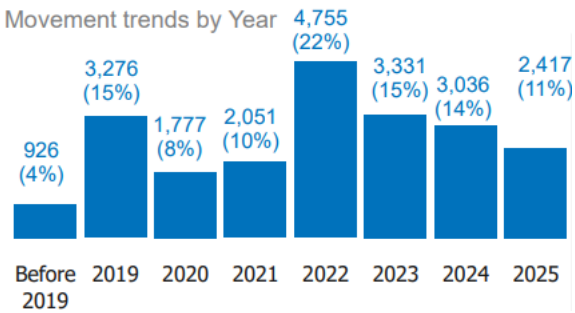
[2] *Refer to RMMS Briefing Paper 3: Smuggled South, March 2017*

The overlap between the two systems was estimated at 9 per cent, indicating that each captures a distinct segment of the population and suggesting a substantial number of individuals not yet identified. A higher overlap would have suggested duplication of the same individuals within the reporting period.



The community-led system focuses on migration, displacement, and onward movement behaviors, as well as the protection risks encountered *en route*. These efforts enable displaced people and migrants to share their experiences safely, helping UNHCR identify and respond to urgent protection needs. Aligned with UNHCR's Accountability to Affected People (AAP) framework[3], the approach empowers displaced individuals to voice concerns and participate in decision-making. Data is collected through a secure digital platform that is compliant with UNHCR's data protection and information security policies, and has the capacity to conduct anonymous surveys.

Among households surveyed through the community-led system, the top five respondent nationalities were: Democratic Republic of the Congo (1,040), Burundi (742), Rwanda (256), the Republic of the Congo (24), and Somalia (16). Refugees from the Democratic Republic of the Congo continue to constitute the largest refugee population in Southern Africa, largely due to instability in the country's eastern regions. Zambia hosts the highest number of protracted DRC refugees in the region, with 7,518 individuals residing there for over 20 years. Burundian refugees and other groups are mainly engaged in secondary movements, which account for 2 per cent of all movements linked to mixed movements (see the onward movement by year). Most routes used were land-based, with very few by air or sea.



[3] *Refer to UNHCR-AAP Operational Guidance | UNHCR, September 2020.*

Transit data from the 10,436 individual surveys shows Tanzania as the primary transit country, followed by Burundi, Zambia, Malawi, and Zimbabwe. For asylum, Malawi was identified as the leading country, followed by Tanzania, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and South Africa. In terms of final destination, Malawi again ranked first, followed by South Africa, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Zambia. However, only 13 per cent of respondents reported reaching their intended destination. Of these, 44 per cent raised concerns about access to healthcare, with 58 per cent experiencing difficulties in obtaining services.

Access to education was equally limited: only 23 per cent of children were enrolled in public schools, with barriers including unaffordable fees, denial of enrolment, reliance on private schools, and lack of documentation. Access to livelihoods was also constrained, with only 6 per cent reporting that a family member was employed. Most households relied instead on humanitarian assistance, savings, remittances, or informal trade.

In terms of financial inclusion, 45 per cent of respondents reported access to banking services. The remainder cited lack of documentation, never having applied, or banks denying applications as barriers. Alarmingly, 69 per cent of respondents reported experiencing challenges that resulted in violent incidents at some point in their journey or upon arrival.

Which routes are people taking?

Between January and June 2025, people on the move across Southern Africa, including migrants and refugees, are primarily traveling along six key corridors, each marked by different protection challenges. The largest flows are from the Central African Republic (57,000 persons) and South Sudan (25,000 persons) into the Democratic Republic of the Congo, where displacement pressures are already high.

Additional routes see movements from the Democratic Republic of the Congo into the Republic of the Congo (8,100 persons), Zambia (2,800 persons), and Malawi (1,800 persons), often in search of safety or sustainable responses to their needs and those of their families. Beyond the mainland, smaller but high-risk maritime movements connect Burundi and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, via Tanzania, to Madagascar and Mauritius, with some reaching from Pakistan to Madagascar (175 persons).

These journeys expose people to exploitation, detention, and perilous sea crossings, underscoring the urgent need for cross-border protection mechanisms and humanitarian assistance. According to the enhanced and harmonized

Regional Mixed Movements Data Collection and Analysis[4], forcibly displaced and stateless persons used multiple routes between January and June 2025, as illustrated in the map below.

Six main corridors for mixed movements (Jan - Jun 2025)

Route 1 (Primary)
Central African Republic to DRC
57K movers

Route 2 (Primary)
South Sudan to DRC
25K movers

Route 3 (Primary)
DRC to Republic of the Congo
8.1K movers

Route 4 (Primary)
DRC to Zambia
2.8K movers

Route 5 (Primary)
DRC to Malawi
1.8K movers

Route 6 (Secondary)
Indian Ocean routes, from Burundi and DRC passing by Tanzania to Madagascar and Mauritius. Pakistan to Madagascar.
175 movers

[4] *Regional Mixed Movements Data Collection and Analysis encompasses major data collections systems. The first system is integrated into UNHCR and government registration mechanisms, using tools such as PRIMES and national databases. The second system is community-led and captures information on individuals on the move. The community-led system focuses on migration, displacement and onward movement behaviors and protection risks encountered en route.*

How have movements along this route evolved over time?

The comparative analysis of mixed movement routes of refugees and asylum seekers across Southern Africa in 2024 versus the first half of 2025 (January–June) highlights a dramatic increase in scale and a concentration of flows into fewer but more heavily utilized corridors, particularly into the Democratic Republic of the Congo. These shifts heighten protection risks and present urgent challenges for States, humanitarian actors, and development partners. The route-based approach, endorsed by SADC Member States in June 2025, offers an opportunity for regional coherence and responsibility-sharing. Strong engagement from States and donors will be critical to sustaining protection-sensitive responses and ensuring the resilience of asylum systems under mounting pressure. The comparison is based on two dimensions: **scale and growth** and **route structure**:

Scale and Growth

In 2024, flows remained relatively moderate and dispersed. Major routes included South Sudan – Democratic Republic of the Congo – Zambia (over 6,000 persons) and Ethiopia – South Africa via Kenya, Tanzania, Zimbabwe (over 3,000 persons). The Western Indian Ocean maritime route was marginal, with about 300 persons.

- From January to June 2025, movements rose by 152 per cent compared to the whole of 2024. In May 2025 alone, over 100,000 people crossed borders, exceeding the total for all of 2024. The Central African Republic → Democratic Republic of the Congo corridor (57,000) and the South Sudan → Democratic Republic of the Congo corridor (25,000) became dominant, positioning the Democratic Republic of the Congo as a strategic hub for arrival, transit, asylum and onward movement, raising both operational and political stakes.

- In the second half of 2025, the flows identified in the 2024 corridors decreased, leading to the emergence of new corridors and illustrating the dynamic nature of the movements. In 2024, over 3,000 persons used the corridor from Somalia, Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Kenya to Zambia and Zimbabwe. However, in the first half of 2025, only 14 per cent of all flows in this corridor originated from these countries.

Route Structure

- **2024**: The route structure displayed a broader geographical spread. Movements originated from South Sudan, Ethiopia, Burundi, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, passing through Zambia, Tanzania, Zimbabwe, and Botswana en route to destinations such as South Africa and Malawi. The Western Indian Ocean route, though smaller, remained

significant, connecting Tanzania, Mozambique, and island nations such as Madagascar and Mauritius.

- **January–June 2025**: The structure shifted toward fewer but significantly larger corridors. The Central African Republic → Democratic Republic of the Congo and South Sudan → Democratic Republic of the Congo flows alone accounted for over 80,000 individuals in six months. The Democratic Republic of the Congo has emerged as a central hub, simultaneously an origin, transit, and destination country. Secondary corridors (e.g., Democratic Republic of the Congo → Republic of Congo, Zambia, Malawi) remain relevant but are increasingly overshadowed.

- This narrowing of routes created pressure points, underscoring the need for scalable reception systems and coordinated cross-border response.

In conclusion, while protection risks persisted across both years, their nature shifted. In 2024, lower volume and more dispersed flows localized risks to specific border areas. By 2025, however, high-volume corridors into the Democratic Republic of the Congo (from the Central African Republic and South Sudan) have led to overcrowding, heightened exposure to exploitation and violence, and reduced access to asylum procedures. Asylum and transit countries, including the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Tanzania, South Sudan, Mozambique, and South Africa, remain hotspots where incidents require urgent monitoring and response.

Common routes frequently used for mixed movements (2024)

Route 1 (Primary)
South Sudan, the DRC, and Zambia
Over 6K movers

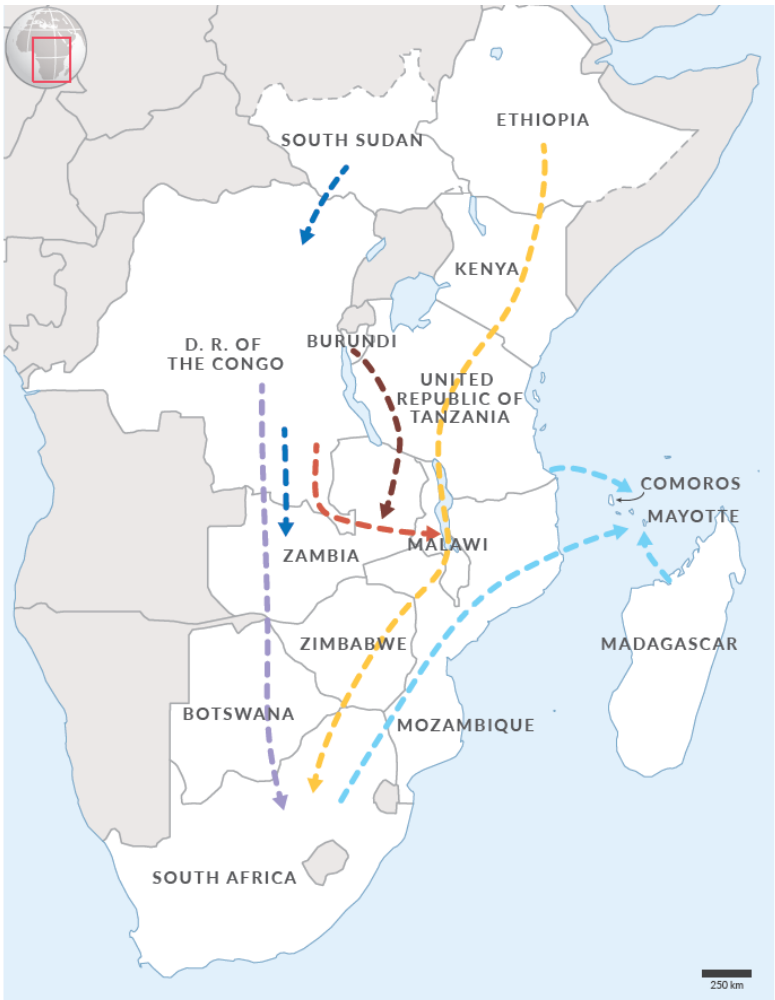
Route 2 (Primary)
Ethiopia to South Africa, passing through Kenya, Tanzania, and Zimbabwe
Over 3K movers

Route 3 (Primary)
Burundi to Zambia
Over 2K movers

Route 4 (Primary)
DRC to Malawi
Over 2K movers

Route 5 (Primary)
DRC to South Africa, passing through Zambia and Botswana
Over 1.5K movers

Route 6 (Secondary)
Indian Ocean routes, passing by Tanzania, Mozambique, Madagascar, Mauritius, Comoros, Seychelles, and all islands in the Indian Ocean.
Over 300 movers

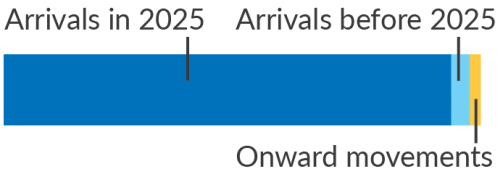


Population Profile

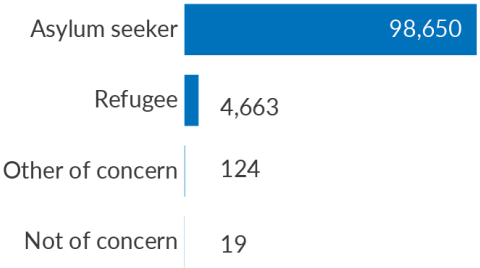
Who are the people moving along this route?

Over 100,000 refugees and asylum-seekers were involved in mixed movements during the reporting period. Of this population, 1 per cent have specific protection needs. In addition, 10 per cent of individuals aged five years and above are enrolled in the biometric system.

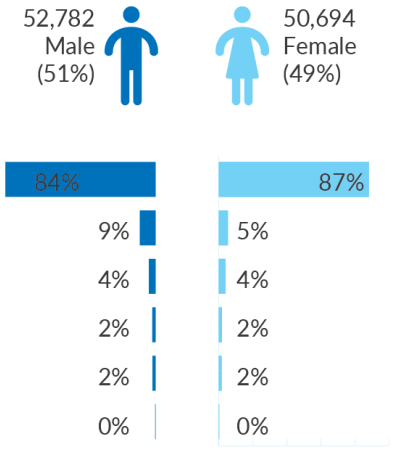
Types of Movement



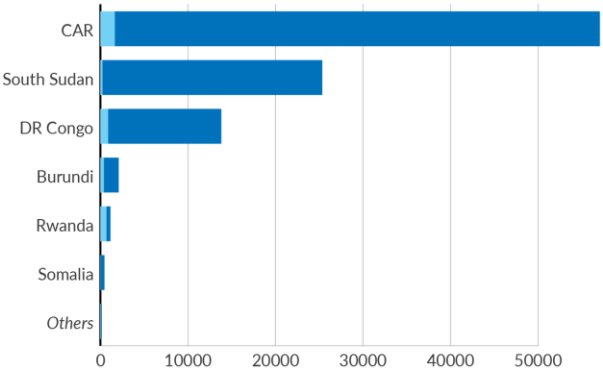
Legal Status



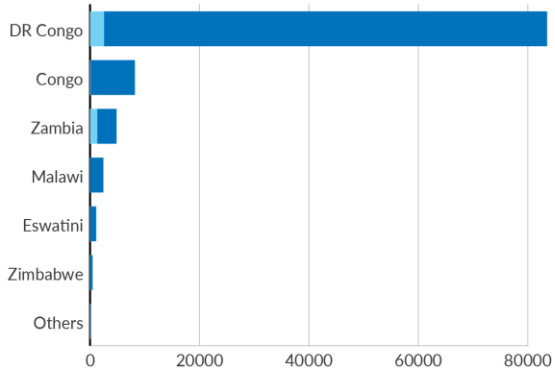
Age / Gender

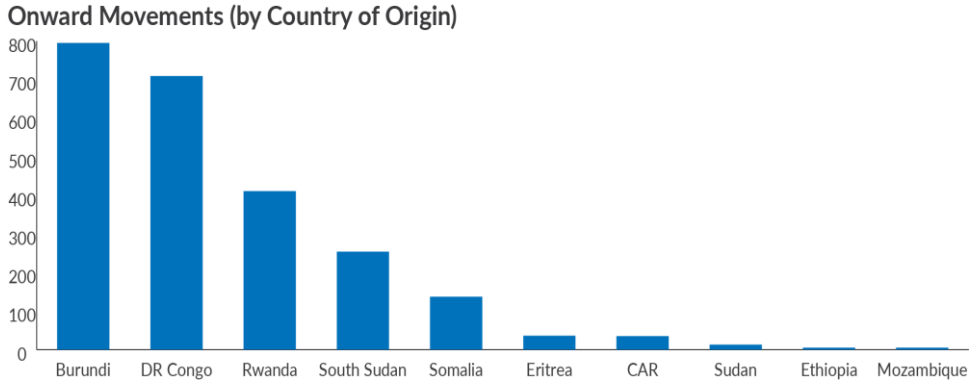


By Country of Origin



By Country of Asylum





Why are people leaving their country of origin?

Conflict is the primary reason for 98 per cent of movements. Additionally, among the 2,124 families surveyed through the community-led data collection approach, the following reasons were identified.

Why are people continuing to move along this route?

The mapping of the most common routes in the Southern Africa region from 2024 to mid-2025 confirms that the Democratic Republic of the Congo remains both a central hub of transit and a primary country of origin for mixed movements in the region. The Democratic Republic of the Congo not only generates significant onward flows toward the Republic of the Congo, Zambia, Malawi, and further into the Indian Ocean but also receives large-scale arrivals, particularly from the Central African Republic, Sudan, and South Sudan.

Conflict remains the principal driver, with 98 per cent of surveyed families citing it as the reason for leaving, and most people specifically highlighting a lack of safety and security, fear of ethnic persecution, and exposure to gender-based violence. Ongoing insecurity in the country's eastern provinces, combined with natural disasters in the region, has significantly contributed to these mixed and onward movement patterns. These overlapping pressures, compounded by recurrent natural disasters and economic fragility, sustain a cycle of displacement that extends beyond the Democratic Republic of the Congo's borders into neighbouring states and across the Indian Ocean to Madagascar and Mauritius. This complex mobility underscores both the urgency of protection and the strain placed on host communities in the wider Southern Africa region.

To where are people trying to get and why?

In 2024, South Africa was the primary destination for asylum seekers in the region, followed by the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Zambia, the Republic of Congo, and Malawi.

However, data from the first half of 2025 highlights a notable shift: the Democratic Republic of the Congo has now become the leading country of asylum, with Zambia, the Republic of Congo, and Malawi following closely behind.

This change reflects both evolving conflict dynamics and limited access to traditional destinations, such as South Africa, where restrictive asylum policies and protection challenges have reduced the number of new arrivals. By contrast, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, despite its own instability, has remained a major point of entry and refuge for people fleeing neighbouring crises, underscoring the complexity of displacement patterns in Southern Africa.

Who is in need of international protection?

Those in need of international protection in Southern Africa include individuals fleeing conflict, insecurity, and persecution on the basis of ethnicity, gender, political opinion, or forced recruitment. Out of the 2,124 families surveyed (respondents), the majority of respondents cited lack of safety and security (1,855 respondents) as their primary reason for leaving their country of origin. Other drivers include fear of harm due to ethnicity (322 respondents), gender-based violence (295 respondents), discrimination (142 respondents), political persecution (121 respondents), and forced recruitment (100 respondents). These factors fall within the definition of a refugee under the 1951 Refugee Convention and the 1969 OAU Convention.

In countries of asylum, transit, and destination, the overwhelming reasons for forced displacement are safety (2,022 respondents) and lack of access to asylum (2,021 respondents). This demonstrates that people are not primarily motivated by

economic opportunities, but rather by the search for protection from harm, with safety as the dominant pull factor.

A significant proportion, 295 respondents, explicitly reported fleeing due to GBV. Women and girls, who make up over 70 per cent of the survey population, face compounded risks of assault, sexual exploitation, and domestic abuse both during displacement and upon arrival. This group requires targeted protection services, including access to legal remedies, psychosocial support, and safe reporting mechanisms.

How have these movement patterns changed over the past decade?

The Southern Africa region experiences significant mixed movements, both regular and irregular, within and between countries. These flows include refugees, asylum-seekers, economic migrants, victims of trafficking, and unaccompanied children, many of whom move irregularly. Most movements are from rural to urban areas.

Before 2024, movements along the Southern Route were limited and fragmented. However, studies by IOM and other specialist organizations provided indicative data on the scale and profiles of those involved. Estimates from IOM in 2009 suggested that 17,000 - 20,000 migrants, primarily Ethiopians and Somalis, travelled annually towards South Africa. In 2017, the Mixed Migration Centre (MMC) used Ethiopian asylum applications in South Africa as a proxy to estimate annual flows of 14,750 - 16,850. These movements were dominated by young men, as the harsh conditions and high risks discouraged most women from attempting irregular journeys. More recent MMC reporting from early 2024 confirmed ongoing flows with undocumented migrants, mostly Ethiopians, intercepted while en route to South Africa along the Southern Route: Zambia (342), Kenya (168), Malawi (159), Mozambique (82), South Africa (52), and Zimbabwe (10).[5]

With the rollout of the route-based approach in 2024, UNHCR fostered the implementation of the 2024-2027 regional strategy to strengthen protection and solutions for refugees and migrants engaged in mixed movements along Southern Africa's migration routes. A regional monitoring system was established, generating more systematic evidence on the evolving dynamics and trends of mixed movement. This had already documented a sharp rise in refugee and migrant flows in 2025, underlining the need for coordinated, protection-centered responses.

[5] *MMC, Eastern and Southern Africa, Quarter 1, 2024: https://mixedmigration.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/QMMU_Q1_2024-_ESA.pdf*

In 2024, strengthened data collection under this approach generated key insights. A total of 40,738 refugees and asylum seekers were recorded as part of mixed movements in Southern Africa, with 7 per cent identified as engaging in onward movements. While 36 per cent of all movements occurred by land, significant data gaps remain for other routes. In the first half of 2025, more than 100,000 refugees and asylum-seekers were identified as part of these movements, with 2 per cent involved in onward movements.

Protection Environment

What do we know about applicable legal frameworks and access?

Most SADC countries have hosted refugees for decades and continue to uphold an open-door policy enabling forcibly displaced and stateless people to seek safety on their territory and, in some cases, to integrate.

The majority of Southern African states are signatories to the 1951 Refugee Convention and the 1969 OAU Refugee Convention, with asylum laws incorporated into national frameworks. However, implementation remains uneven, with wide variation in recognition rates, access to registration, and issuance of documentation.

While South Africa, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and other countries such as Botswana, Zambia, and Zimbabwe maintain operational asylum systems, several States restrict access through encampment policies, geographic limitations, or administrative barriers. In addition, a number of States have entered reservations to 18 provisions of the 1951 Convention, limiting fundamental rights of refugees and asylum-seekers, including freedom of movement, access to public education, and employment.

The recent adoption of the SADC Regional Migration Policy Framework and Action Plan (2022–2030) and the regional policy on the management of refugees and asylum seekers provides an important basis for harmonizing standards. Nonetheless, gaps in national implementation, resource allocation, and political will continue to hinder effective access to protection.

Protection risks

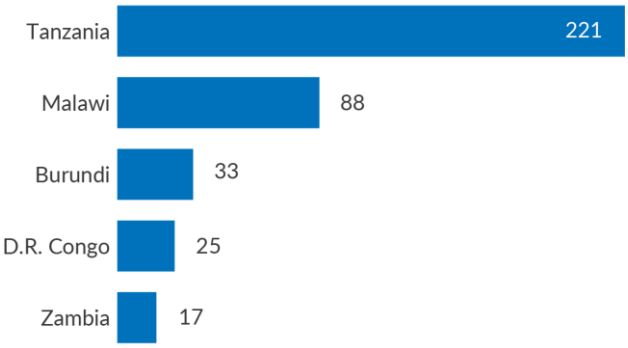
In response to the growing complexity of displacement and mixed movements across Southern Africa, UNHCR has strengthened registration systems and empowered refugee and asylum-seeking communities to contribute directly to data collection efforts. This participatory approach captures critical information on demographic profiles, movement routes, drivers of displacement, drivers of mixed

and onward movement, protection risks, and access to services in countries of destination.

Between January and June 2025, the community-led data collection initiative identified women and children representing 71 per cent of all respondents, highlighting their heightened vulnerability. Alarmingly, 37 per cent of respondents reported experiencing serious protection incidents during their journeys. The most frequently cited risks included:

- Assault and battery **40 per cent**
- Gender-based violence **37per cent**
- Robbery 28 per cent
- Death 19 per cent

The top five countries where protection incidents occurred are illustrated in the accompanying graphic:



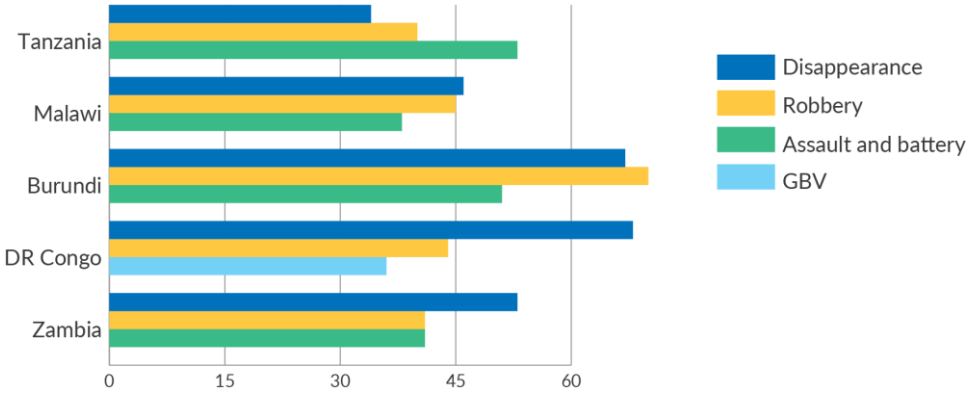
These findings are consistent with broader regional trends documented by MMC [6] and IOM [7], which highlight systemic exposure to violence, exploitation, and rights violations along the Southern Africa route.

It is important to note that most survey participants were located in Malawi, South Africa, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Respondents across the top five countries reported the following types of incidents:

[6] *MMC, Eastern and Southern Africa, Quarter 1, 2024: https://mixedmigration.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/QMMU_Q1_2024-_ESA.pdf*

[7] *https://publications.iom.int/books/pilot-study-southern-migration-route-and-access-protection-services*

Top 3 reported incidents, by type



Smuggling networks also played a role in facilitating journeys, with 9 per cent of individuals reporting the use of smugglers. On average, households paid USD $1,147 for the entire journey. Of those who engaged smugglers, 7 per cent made contact online, 20 per cent were referred, and 73 per cent met smugglers while en route. Notably, over 87 per cent of respondents reported being unaware of the risks associated with their journey. Among those who were informed, most learned of the risks in their country of origin.

Among the 2,124 households surveyed, 83 per cent were identified by UNHCR or national authorities, while 17 per cent remained unidentified, suggesting they may be undocumented refugees or irregular economic migrants. During transit, 34 per cent of households applied for asylum, with 88 per cent of these applications resulting in the issuance of legal documentation. Upon arrival at their destination, 88 per cent of respondents applied for asylum, of which 93 per cent were successfully documented. The vast majority of asylum applications (98 per cent) were submitted in person, while only 2 per cent were filed online.

Protection Needs, Response, Gaps

Refugees and migrants moving along Southern Africa's mixed movement routes face acute protection risks both in transit and in countries of destination. Data from recent surveys, together with IOM and MMC reports, point to persistent barriers in access to asylum, documentation, child protection services, and durable solutions. While destination countries generally provide better access to protection than transit states, systemic gaps, such as long waiting periods and limited reception capacity, continue to undermine rights. This section highlights the key protection needs, service gaps, and the evolving responses of governments and partners across the region.

What are the protection needs along the route?

Documentation and Legal Status

Only 34 per cent of respondents from the community-led data initiative applied for asylum along the route before they arrived to Malawi, South Africa, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and other countries, largely due to a lack of awareness, documentation, or trust in authorities. Where applications were made, most (87 per cent) received a document, primarily refugee ID cards and asylum-seeker certificates. However, limited legal recognition and the absence of enforceable rights increase exposure to exploitation, arbitrary detention, and deportation.

Access to Safe Asylum Processes

Access to asylum remains highly inconsistent along the route. While many asylum and transit countries legally uphold the right to asylum, systems are often weak or dysfunctional. The absence of accessible registration points, combined with protracted and opaque procedures, discourages applications.

Child Protection Needs

Children face a significant protection gap. Data indicate that 37 per cent of children among respondents in countries of asylum lack a birth certificate. Contributing factors include home births, lack of parental documents, and refusal by authorities to issue certificates. Without registration, children risk statelessness, exclusion from education and health services, and long-term protection deficits.

Psychosocial Vulnerability

Long waiting periods for documentation or appeal outcomes, combined with fear of detention and uncertainty, contribute to psychosocial distress. Protracted displacement without legal clarity exacerbates risks of family separation, child labour, and gender-based violence.

How are governments and other actors responding to mixed movements with protection and solutions space?

Restrictive Approaches in Transit States

Transit countries often maintain restrictive asylum policies. While legal frameworks exist, implementation is weak. Practices such as deportations and pushbacks have been documented in Mozambique, Zambia, and Zimbabwe.

Destination Country Dynamics

South Africa and other key destinations offer comparatively stronger legal frameworks, yet face serious challenges, including massive case backlogs, xenophobic hostility, and weak integration policies. Access is further undermined by inconsistent implementation and resource constraints.

Regional and International Frameworks

The Southern African Development Community (SADC) has adopted a Regional Migration Policy Framework and Action Plan (2022 - 2030), which includes provisions on forced displacement, as well as a regional policy on the management of refugees and asylum seekers. These frameworks reflect growing recognition of displacement as a regional priority. However, implementation remains uneven across member states. At the continental and international level, the African Union and UNHCR continue to promote stronger regional coordination, though efforts are constrained by limited resources and political will. The IOM supports voluntary return and humanitarian corridors, though uptake remains limited.

Role of NGOs and Civil Society

Non-governmental and faith-based organizations play a critical role in filling service gaps by providing legal aid, psychosocial support, and shelter. However, limited funding and scaling challenges restrict their overall impact.

Solutions Space

Durable solutions remain scarce. Local integration policies are underdeveloped, resettlement numbers remain limited, and conditions for safe voluntary return are often absent. As a result, the protection and solutions space is narrowing, with many governments prioritizing security concerns over protection.

What do we know about access to rights and services in host communities?

Legal Documentation in Destination Countries

Nearly 89 per cent of respondents applied for asylum in their country of destination, with 94 per cent receiving documentation. This reflects stronger access frameworks compared to transit states. The main documents issued included asylum permits, pre-registration slips, and residence permits.

Service Access Barriers

Despite higher documentation coverage, barriers persist. Respondents cited difficulties accessing reception offices, fear of arrest, and long waiting times. Only 2 per cent applied online, underscoring digital exclusion and reliance on in-person procedures. Delays in issuing identity document, often extending to two to five years, further undermine access to health, education, and livelihood opportunities.

Children's Rights in Host Communities

Most children (93 per cent) are registered, and 77 per cent were born in asylum countries. Nonetheless, gaps remain, over one-third of children lack birth certificates, with direct consequences for access to social services and nationality rights.

Access to Health and Livelihoods

Health access is constrained across host communities: 44 per cent of surveyed households reported difficulties obtaining healthcare, primarily due to documentation gaps, cost, or discrimination. Psychosocial vulnerabilities remain pronounced, as prolonged uncertainty and waiting periods contribute to distress, family separation, and increased exposure to gender-based violence. Livelihood opportunities are also severely limited, only 6 per cent of respondents reported that a family member was employed, leaving most households reliant on humanitarian aid, remittances, or informal trade. While 45 per cent reported some

access to banking services, the majority remain excluded due to a lack of documentation or denial of applications, limiting financial independence and resilience.

What do we know about existing gaps in protection?

AWARENESS AND INFORMATION

Lack of awareness of asylum rights is among the most frequently cited reasons for not seeking asylum in both transit and destination countries. This aligns with findings from MMC's Mixed Migration Review, which identifies limited access to accurate and trusted information as a structural barrier.

TRUST IN AUTHORITIES

A deficit of trust discourages displaced people from engaging with official asylum systems. Many respondents reported fearing detention, deportation, or discriminatory treatment when approaching authorities.

ADMINISTRATIVE BARRIERS AND DELAYS

Extended appeal processes: 43 respondents reported cases pending for over five years, and a protracted waiting period for identity documents reflects systemic protection failures. These delays leave individuals without legal status and restrict access to essential services.

CHILD PROTECTION GAPS

Failure to register births, whether due to discriminatory practices, institutional refusal, or parental documentation barriers, places children at risk of statelessness. This is a recurring gap across asylum contexts in Southern Africa.

EDUCATION GAPS

- Despite relatively high registration rates among children, more than one-third lack birth certificates, creating barriers to school enrolment and long-term access to social services.
- Less than 22 per cent of refugee children are enrolled in public schools, with affordability, lack of documentation, and denial of enrolment cited as primary obstacles.

- Heavy reliance on private or informal schooling reinforces inequality and limits opportunities for integration into host community education systems.

HEALTH GAPS

- Access to healthcare remains inconsistent, with 44 per cent of respondents reporting difficulties obtaining services. Barriers include high costs, lack of documentation, and discrimination by service providers.
- Psychosocial support is scarce, despite widespread exposure to violence, family separation, and long waiting periods for legal clarity, all of which contribute to distress and heightened vulnerability.
- Limited capacity in host health systems further restricts displaced populations' access to essential and specialized care, particularly for survivors of gender-based violence and persons with disabilities.

LIVELIHOOD GAPS

- Opportunities for self-reliance remain minimal, with only 6 per cent of surveyed households reporting formal employment. The majority rely on humanitarian assistance, informal trade, remittances, or savings, which are unstable and unsustainable.
- Legal and administrative barriers, such as delays in issuing identity documents and restrictions on work rights, undermine access to stable livelihoods.
- Exclusion from financial systems persists: while 45 per cent reported some access to banking services, the majority remain unable to open accounts due to lack of documentation or institutional refusal, limiting resilience and financial inclusion.

What do we know about gaps in protection services?

RECEPTION INFRASTRUCTURE

Limited reception capacity continues to hinder access to asylum. The geographic inaccessibility of registration centers and insufficient staffing create bottlenecks that discourage asylum-seekers from applying.

APPEALS AND CASE MANAGEMENT

Asylum systems are burdened by extensive backlogs. Respondents reported appeal processes extending beyond five years, undermining confidence in the fairness and efficiency of asylum systems.

DOCUMENTATION DELIVERY

Delays of two to five years in identity documents restrict access to basic services and livelihoods. Such delays push individuals into informality and heighten vulnerability to exploitation.

SUPPORT FOR VULNERABLE GROUPS

Specialized services for children, survivors of gender-based violence, and persons with disabilities remain fragmented and underfunded. Case management systems lack adequate coverage, sustainability, and consistency across the region.

General Conclusion

The Southern Africa and Western Indian Ocean migration routes remain highly complex, fluid, and protection-sensitive. Displacement has surged dramatically, up 152 per cent compared to 2024, with over 100,000 refugees and asylum seekers recorded in mixed movements during the first half of 2025. The Democratic Republic of the Congo has emerged as both a central hub and a critical pressure point, simultaneously a source, transit, and destination country.

Conflict and insecurity remain the overwhelming drivers of movement, with 98 per cent of families citing violence and persecution as the main reasons for leaving. Women and children make up the majority (71 per cent) of those on the move and face heightened risks of gender-based violence, exploitation, and denial of basic rights such as birth registration and access to education.

Despite significant political progress, including the SADC adoption of the Route-Based Approach (RteBA) in June 2025, gaps persist in protection systems, documentation, child protection, and durable solutions. Weak asylum infrastructures, inconsistent application of non-refoulement, and fragmented services amplify vulnerabilities. The evidence highlights an urgent need for coordinated, scalable, and protection-centered responses, integrating climate risks and strengthening trust between displaced communities and authorities.

Recommendations

1. Strengthen Regional Data and Monitoring Systems

- Scale up the **community-led mixed movement data platform**, piloted in South Africa and Malawi, into a fully regional system.
- Harmonize data across UNHCR, governments, and partners to close gaps in disaggregated data (age, gender, disability, protection needs).
- Ensure displaced people are actively engaged in shaping protection responses, in line with UNHCR's **Accountability to Affected People (AAP)** commitments.

2. Enhance Legal and Protection Frameworks

- Support **policy reform and capacity-building** for fair, transparent asylum procedures and prevention of refoulement.
- Expand **birth registration and legal documentation services**, especially for children and survivors of gender-based violence, to prevent statelessness.
- Establish and scale up **specialized services** for vulnerable groups, including women, children, and persons with disabilities.

3. Address Protection Gaps Along Routes

- Expand reception infrastructure and increase staffing at registration centres to reduce bottlenecks and backlogs.
- Shorten documentation delivery timelines (currently up to five years), enabling faster access to healthcare, education, and livelihoods.
- Enhance **cross-border protection mechanisms** to mitigate risks of trafficking, detention, and exploitation.

4. Advance Regional Cooperation and Solutions

- Operationalize the **SADC Route-Based Strategy (2024 - 2027)** by translating commitments into concrete action plans with adequate resources.
- Strengthen partnerships with AU, IOM, UNODC, ILO, NGOs, and civil society for coordinated humanitarian corridors, voluntary return support, and durable solutions.
- Promote regional responsibility-sharing, especially given the Democratic Republic of the Congo's dual role as a displacement source and host.

5. Integrate Climate Risk and Development Linkages

- Embed **climate resilience planning** into protection strategies, acknowledging that 1.3 million people have already been displaced by climate shocks.
- Link humanitarian assistance with **development and livelihood initiatives**, reducing dependency on aid and supporting host community inclusion.

In summary, the report underscores that Southern Africa is at a turning point. While political momentum around the route-based approach is strong, systemic protection gaps must be urgently addressed. Scaling data-driven, coordinated, and human-centered responses will be critical to safeguarding displaced populations and strengthening resilience in the region.

SOUTHERN AFRICA AND WESTERN INDIAN OCEAN ROUTES

ROUTE-BASED APPROACH

June 2025

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