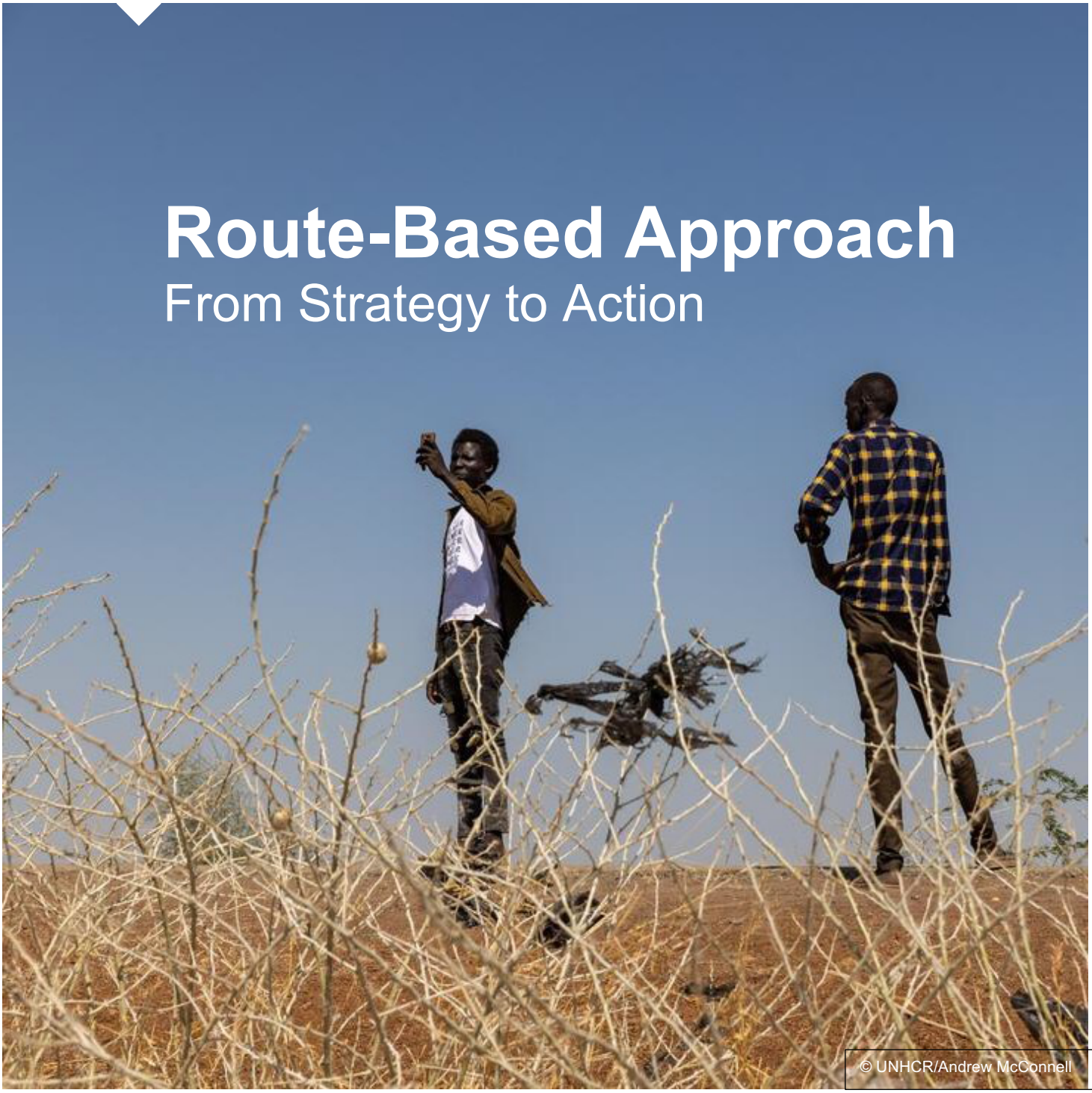
UNHCR
The UN Refugee Agency

Route-Based Approach

From Strategy to Action



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Introduction and Purpose of the Briefing Note

The route-based approach, jointly developed by UNHCR and IOM in collaboration with other actors, seeks to enhance protection and coordination along key mixed movement routes by promoting early, consistent, and collaborative engagement across countries of origin, transit, and destination.

This briefing note provides an update on the steps taken by UNHCR to advance the implementation of the route-based approach to mixed and onward movements. It describes key guidance and policy workstreams underpinning the operationalization of the route-based approach, and it offers practical guidance for implementation and resources that may be of interest to Member States in responding to complex cross-border movements of refugees and asylum-seekers.

UNHCR welcomes continued collaboration with all Member States and partners to advance protection-sensitive and sustainable responses to mixed and onward movements.

I. Overview of the Route Based Approach

People on the move including refugees, asylum-seekers and migrants, face serious risks throughout their journeys across borders, often as part of mixed and onward movements driven by a combination of factors including persecution, conflict, violence, climate shocks, and limited access to livelihoods or basic services. While the vast majority of displaced people remain within their own regions, cross-border movements of refugees and migrants pose complex and multifaceted challenges, with significant ***protection needs along key displacement and migration corridors***.

States are navigating increasingly complex mobility patterns. Asylum systems face mounting pressures, with 8.4 million individual asylum applications pending globally at the end of 2024. At the same time, irregular migration continues to strain national capacities, while limited access to protection or socio-economic inclusion contributes to further mixed and onward movement. These ***challenges are compounded by financial cuts in the humanitarian and development sectors***. In this context, preserving the integrity of the global asylum system is imperative: those fleeing conflict, persecution, violence, and human rights violations must be able to access protection, and States enabled to manage mobility in a principled and effective manner.

Efforts to intervene early and invest strategically along the route are still evolving. Responses remain fragmented and insufficient, lacking the predictability and coherence needed to meet the challenges faced by States and by individuals, particularly those at heightened risk of harm or loss of life. There is an urgent need for more coordinated, protection-sensitive responses.

In response, UNHCR and IOM, along with other actors including civil society members, developed the route-based approach, a strategic and operational framework designed to support protection-sensitive asylum and migration systems along key displacement and

migration corridors. It addresses risks and operational challenges jointly and across borders, enabling early, coordinated, and solutions-oriented interventions.

In practice, this comprehensive approach promotes:

- ***Coordinated engagement*** across regions and all stages of mixed and onward movement.
- ***Early intervention*** with consistent protection safeguards and timely response before risks escalate.
- ***Support to States*** for lawful, humane, and sustainable migration and asylum management.
- Reliable alternatives to dangerous journeys at scale, including **inclusion of refugees in migration pathways, such as labour, education or family reunification,** which would reduce reliance on smugglers and traffickers.
- Increased ***access to protection and protection sensitive solutions***, including resettlement and voluntary return.
- Stronger cooperation with States, regional bodies, and humanitarian and development actors ***to link humanitarian action with development planning,*** enabling earlier inclusion in national systems, investment in host communities, and socio-economic opportunities that support long-term protection, self-reliance, and social cohesion.

II. The Six Pillars of the Route-Based Approach

The route-based approach is structured around ***six mutually reinforcing pillars*** that together enable timely, principled, and coordinated responses to mixed and onward movements. Each pillar targets a critical aspect of the journey, providing a framework to protect and support people on the move while strengthening national systems and cross-border cooperation.

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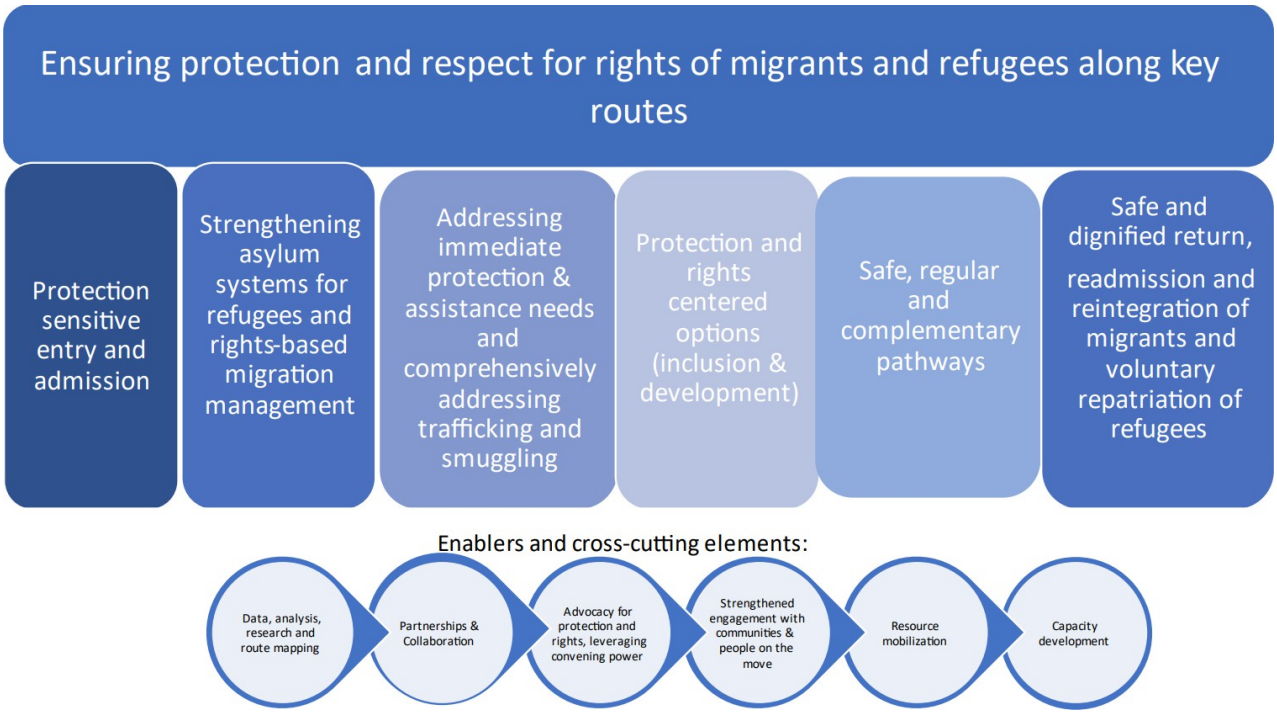

- **Entry and admission**: supporting States at key points of entry to *ensure protection-sensitive border management* including access to territory in line with international law, early identification of international protection needs and other vulnerabilities, appropriate reception safeguards, and referral pathways. These measures help States manage borders lawfully and efficiently, uphold the principle of non-refoulement, and address irregular movement and security concerns.
- **Strengthening asylum systems and rights-based migration management**: promotion of fair, efficient, and adaptable asylum systems that are grounded in international refugee law and dignified treatment of all migrants. *While distinct in purpose and legal basis, asylum and migration systems must function in a coordinated manner* to reduce vulnerabilities, prevent misuse of asylum channels, and support orderly, protection-sensitive responses along key migration routes.
- **Addressing immediate protection needs, assistance, trafficking, and smuggling**: *timely,* rights-based responses to the urgent protection and assistance needs of people in mixed movements, particularly those at heightened risk, including access to shelter, medical care, psychosocial support, legal aid, and referral pathways to protection.
- **Protection and rights-centered options, including inclusion and development**: *early inclusion* of refugees, stateless persons, and others with protection needs *in national systems from the outset*, not only to uphold their rights, but to foster self-reliance, social cohesion, and long-term development and solutions.
- **Safe, regular, and complementary pathways**: expansion of *safe, regular, and complementary pathways for both refugees and migrants as part of a comprehensive protection and migration management strategy* to offer alternatives to dangerous journeys, relieve pressure on asylum systems, and foster responsibility-sharing, and socio-economic contributions to host communities.

- **Safe and dignified return, readmission, and reintegration of migrants and voluntary repatriation or readmission of refugees** - fair and efficient return, readmission, and reintegration systems for those not in need of international protection and *informed, safe and* voluntary repatriation for refugees, with reintegration support to ensure durable outcomes and maintain the integrity of asylum systems. Where readmission of refugees takes place under specific arrangements, this must uphold international protection standards and principles of responsibility-sharing.

III. Policy Options to Support Implementation

The route-based approach promotes a ***set of lawful, rights-based policy options to help States address the complex challenges posed by mixed and onward movements***. Grounded in international law, these policy options support fair and efficient asylum systems, timely access to protection, and improved migration governance, while reducing reliance on ad hoc or restrictive measures. These options are not standalone solutions but must be embedded within broader efforts to strengthen asylum and migration systems, reduce reliance on irregular journeys, and promote shared responsibility. Among these options, two areas have been the focus of recent policy and operational guidance:

Return of persons not *found* in need of international protection*:* Returning individuals who, after a fair and final procedure, are found not to be in need of international protection is essential to the integrity of asylum systems. When return systems are inefficient or delayed, asylum procedures can be misused, public trust may be eroded, and restrictive measures may be introduced that risk undermining access to protection. Efficient and rights-compliant returns help reduce backlogs, deter misuse of the asylum channel, and sustain State willingness to uphold their protection obligations. Building on its longstanding position on the return of persons not in need of international protection, UNHCR published in March 2025 a guidance note on "*The Need for Effective Return Systems and the Potential Role of Return Hubs*" outlining practical and principled steps to support safe, dignified, and lawful returns. The note also examines the use of return hubs as a policy option under specific conditions, highlighting safeguards, eligibility criteria, and potential areas for UNHCR engagement alongside IOM and State actors. These efforts are firmly rooted in Executive Committee Conclusion No. 96 and underscore UNHCR's good offices role in advising on return practices, supporting documentation efforts, and promoting the responsibility of States to receive their nationals while ensuring protection from refoulement and statelessness.

Lawful transfers of refugees and asylum-seekers: In the face of onward movements and complex mixed flows, some States have considered or pursued arrangements to transfer asylum-seekers and refugees to third countries. While UNHCR maintains that asylum-seekers should ordinarily be processed in the

territory of the State where they arrive, specific guidance was issued, in August 2025, to clarify the conditions under which international transfer agreements can be consistent with international law. The *International Agreements for the Transfer of Refugees and Asylum* outlines the legal basis, scope, and safeguards necessary to ensure that transfers are conducted in line with international protection principles and standards, and in a manner that advances responsibility sharing, solidarity and sustainability. It stresses that persons already recognized as refugees by the current host State should not be transferred, and that agreements must guarantee access to fair and efficient asylum procedures, lawful stay, and core rights in the receiving country. In line with its mandate, UNHCR may play a role in advising States on the design of transfer agreements, monitoring their implementation, and ensuring adherence to protection standards and responsibility-sharing commitments, while continuing to underscore that such measures must complement, not replace, State asylum responsibilities.

In addition to these options, the route-based approach promotes a range of other policy options summarized in the visual "broader approach to policy options". Together, they provide States with a lawful and principled menu of responses tailored to different contexts and movement dynamics.

IV. Operational Responses

Efforts are ongoing to support the operationalization of the route-based approach in priority contexts. These operational responses translate the key principles and objectives of the route-based approach into practice: they provide tangible entry points for engagement with States, regional bodies, and partners on the ground ensuring that humanitarian, development, and protection actors can work together to deliver complementary and predictable responses.

Multi-Purpose Hubs (MPHs)

Multi-Purpose Hubs are a key modality for operationalizing the route-based approach. Strategically located along key mixed movement routes, MPH ***bring together multi-agency services - including protection, assistance, information, and referrals - in one location,*** enabling a coordinated and predictable response for refugees, asylum-seekers, migrants, and host communities. By facilitating early identification of protection needs and other vulnerabilities, and linking people to national systems or legal pathways, MPHs provide reliable alternatives to irregular movement, reduce reliance on dangerous onward journeys and strengthen community resilience in countries of origin and transit. MPHs are established in close collaboration with national authorities, UN agencies, NGOs, development actors, and community-based organizations. Current developments include:

- **Operationalization in Chad**: In 2025, the ***newly inaugurated hub in Tiné, Chad***, established jointly with local authorities, began providing integrated services such as registration, legal assistance, GBV response, and mental health and psychosocial support, with further services to be added. Complementing this, UNHCR and the Ministry of Higher Education opened the first Digital Learning Center in Irdimi, linking protection with longer term inclusion through access to university courses and vocational training.[1]
- **Planned scale-up along the routes**: Chad's national plan foresees scaling up to at least five additional hubs along key migration and displacement corridors. In parallel, UNHCR is working with national authorities and partners in other countries, such as Niger and Senegal, to identify and prioritize locations where hubs are most needed. Similar efforts are also being considered in Southern Africa.
- **Mapping for complementarity of services:** Together with IOM and other partners, UNHCR is *mapping existing and planned MPHs, IOM Migrant Resource Centres, and NGO-run humanitarian service points to avoid duplication, strengthen coverage along the routes, and to ensure complementarity of services.*

Rolling out the Digital Gateway in mixed movement contexts

[1] See the video titled "How is UNHCR working to protect refugees in Chad?" which illustrates UNHCR efforts to register new arrivals from Sudan and to expand education and vocational training for refugees and the host community – aimed at reducing the need for individuals to undertake the dangerous journey toward Libya;

The Digital Gateway, together with UNHCR's help page (**Help.unhcr.org**), support efforts to implement the route-based approach by providing continuous access to reliable information and digital services connecting refugees and asylum-seekers in mixed movements to protection and solutions. It ensures that people on the move can access localized, multilingual, and mobile-friendly tools at different points along their journey, such as information on asylum procedures, registration, documentation, and case status updates (RSD, RST), in a remote and self-service manner. Complete with a contact center solution, the Digital Gateway also enables communication through preferred channels (online, phone, email, WhatsApp, and more), ensuring queries and complaints are received, tracked, and addressed efficiently within each context. By improving information flow and enabling remote follow-up, it helps reduce misinformation, improve case management efficiency, and ease pressure on in-person asylum services.

Anchoring the route-based approach in sustainable responses

Sustainable responses are central to operationalizing the route-based approach. They ensure that humanitarian action is systematically linked to development support, inclusion in national systems, and the self-reliance of displaced populations and host communities. This avoids the pitfalls of parallel humanitarian structures and helps create enabling conditions for solutions such as voluntary return, local integration, or third-country pathways. In practice, sustainable responses mean:

- Refugees and stateless persons are included in social protection, health, and education systems from the start;
- Access to livelihoods, financial services, and national ID systems is enabled;
- Investments benefit both refugees and host communities, reducing tensions and fostering cohesion.

Achieving sustainability requires predictable funding and strong partnerships that go beyond humanitarian actors. Development actors and international financial institutions, including the World Bank, the International Finance Corporation (IFC), and regional development banks, are key to financing inclusion, strengthening systems, and expanding socio-economic opportunities. Initiatives such as the World Bank Window for Host Communities and Refugees, the Joint Data Center, and IFC-private sector partnerships illustrate how investments can scale impact and complement humanitarian protection work. For the route-based approach, sustainable responses play a stabilizing role along routes: they foster inclusion and resilience in asylum and transit countries, open access to regular mobility channels, and reduce reliance on dangerous irregular journeys. At the same time, it is essential to understand sustainable responses as part of a broader framework of responsibility-sharing, engaging humanitarian and development actors across countries of origin, asylum, transit, and destination, to ensure protection, solutions, and stability are pursued collectively rather than left to individual States.

V. Collaboration with Others

As the route-based approach is anchored in joint action and UNHCR has been working with partners, including UN agencies, States, and civil society, to strengthen engagement and coordination along key mixed movement routes. Recent initiatives and coordination mechanisms to advance implementation of this comprehensive approach include:

- Together, UNHCR and IOM undertook a ***comprehensive mapping of key routes***, ***protection risks, population profiles, and ongoing activities along the Central Mediterranean and West Africa Atlantic Routes***. This exercise identified gaps and priority areas where coordinated interventions with States, UN agencies, and other stakeholders can be strengthened. Building on this, the two agencies are developing ***joint route-specific strategies for these corridors*** in close cooperation with national authorities and partners. Similar work is being advanced along other key routes and regions, including in the East and Horn of Africa and the Asia-Pacific regions.
- ***Thematic cooperation with specialized agencies and networks is also expanding, enabling targeted responses in areas such as counter-trafficking and child protection.*** Cooperation with UNODC builds on strong policy-level coordination and joint advocacy, with a growing focus on programmatic engagement along key routes, including in south-east Asia route. UNHCR is also working with partners to strengthen safeguards for children in mixed movements through joint programming, advocacy, and capacity development, including via the Intergovernmental Authority on Development, the Southern African Development Community, and the Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action.
- ***Protection at sea*** remains a core thematic area under the route-based approach. The ***Search and Rescue NGO Network*** and ***the Inter-agency Group on the Protection of Refugees and Migrants Moving by Sea*** are key platforms in efforts to safeguard protection standards along key maritime corridors. They bring together civil society, UN agencies, human rights organizations, and other stakeholders to exchange on challenges related to search and rescue at sea, and discuss opportunities to strengthen coordination, advance policy dialogue, and pursue joint or complementary advocacy.
- UNHCR also maintains regular ***consultations with NGOs and civil society along mixed movement routes***. Monthly coordination meetings bring together NGOs working on protection, legal aid, anti-trafficking, research, child protection, and other key areas. They serve as a space to exchange updates, identify joint priorities, and advance collaboration under the route-based approach. A key outcome of these discussions is the ***joint maintenance of an up-to-date mapping of protection services along the routes***. UNHCR is also stepping up dialogue with refugee-led organizations as critical stakeholders for ensuring effective approaches that reflect the needs and rights of refugees and asylum-seekers.

VI. Data as the Basis for Evidence Based Interventions

Data and analysis are central to the route-based approach, providing the evidence to shape targeted, coordinated protection and solutions responses. UNHCR recently developed an ***analytical framework*** which offers a structured lens to capture and interpret mixed and onward movement dynamics, trends, risks, and responses. The framework is applied through ***regular route reports***, combining quantitative indicators with qualitative insights from field monitoring and partners. In 2025, this included the *Central Mediterranean Route Q1 Report*, and a report on South-West Asia Route movements to Europe. Additional reports covering other priority routes are in progress and will further expand the evidence base for coordinated interventions across mixed movement corridors.

These efforts are supported by a range of initiatives aimed at generating timely, coherent, and comparable evidence across agencies and regions:

- ***Joint UNHCR–IOM factsheet on maritime movements:*** produced annually for the Central Mediterranean, the factsheet consolidates trends, profiles, and protection risks, and outlines joint advocacy messages. The model will expand to other priority maritime routes in 2025.
- ***UNHCR BlueRoutes dashboard:*** a new UNHCR interactive platform providing monthly analysis of maritime movements along the East, Central, and West Mediterranean, and West Africa Atlantic routes (with planned expansion).
- ***Planned UNHCR–IOM data interoperability initiative***: building on existing collaboration, UNHCR and IOM are finalizing a joint action to strengthen the operationalization of the route-based approach through improved interoperability of data systems. The initiative aims to enable the two agencies to exchange, link, and jointly analyze data more efficiently, using harmonized definitions, indicators, and methodologies.
- ***Partnership with the Mixed Migration Centre (MMC):*** This long-standing collaboration combines qualitative and quantitative methods to document and analyze profiles, experiences, motivations, and risks, including through longitudinal surveys that track changes over time. Work to date covered the Central Mediterranean, Western Mediterranean, and West Africa–Atlantic routes; in 2025, it is expanding to the Southern Africa route, key corridors in West and Central Africa, the East and Horn of Africa (including the Gulf of Aden), and the Asia region.

VII. Capacity Building on the Route-Based Approach

Building the knowledge, skills, and networks needed to translate the route-based approach from concept to practice is a core investment for UNHCR. In this regard, UNHCR is supporting in capacity-building initiatives that promote shared understanding, foster cross-border collaboration, and ensure that all actors along mixed movement routes can respond effectively and in a complementary manner.

Key initiatives include:

- ***IIHL San Remo course on Mixed Movements:*** jointly organized with the San Remo Institute of International Humanitarian Law. This blended online course targets senior and mid-level government officials, legal practitioners, and civil society partners along mixed movement routes. It equips participants with a deeper understanding of mixed and onward movements, the specific challenges they pose to States and those undertaking such journeys, and the key elements of a route-based protection response.
- **UNHCR-IOM online course on *the protection of migrants and refugees moving by sea***: The self-paced online course is open to State and non-State actors worldwide, aiming to improve prevention, identification, and response to the risks faced by persons in irregular maritime movements, with an age, gender, and diversity perspectives.
- ***UNHCR–UNODC e-learning on trafficking and smuggling:*** developed for UNHCR and UNODC staff and partners. The course focuses on strengthening knowledge of international legal frameworks, victim identification and referral processes, and coordination between protection and law enforcement actors.
- ***UNHCR internal route-based learning programme*** is being developed with the aim of building a shared understanding among UNHCR staff of the route-based approach's six pillars and enabling components, while providing operational tools, case studies, and peer-to-peer learning opportunities.

VIII. Further Resources and Ongoing Updates

Additional background and implementation guidance related to the route-based approach can be found in the documents listed below:

- A Route-Based Approach: Strengthening Protection and Solutions in the Context of Mixed Movements of Refugees and Migrants (see here)
- Route-Based Approach: Establishing Multi-Purpose Hubs - A guide July 2025 (see here)
- Minimum Operational Guidance for Multi-Purpose Hubs *(*see here)
- The Need for Effective Returns Systems and the Potential Role of Return Hubs (see here)
- International Agreements for the Transfer of Refugees and Asylum-Seekers (see here)
- Operationalizing Protection of Children in Mixed Movements in the Route-Based Approach (see here)
- Mapping of Protection Services: A Routes-Based Approach To Protection Services Along Mixed Movement Routes (see here); Dashboard (see here)
- Central Mediterranean Route-Based Report 2025- Q1 report (see *here and snap shot version here*)
- A Panoramic Route-Based Approach: Refugees and migrants from South-West Asia to Europe, July 2025 (see here)
- UNHCR Digital Gateways (see here)
- Executive Committee paper on sustainable responses (EC/76/SC/CRP.17) (see here)

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UNHCR also publishes an external update on the operationalization of the route-based approach, with highlights on policy engagement, inter-agency collaboration, and field progress across priority mixed movement routes.

You can subscribe to receive future editions of the external update directly via email using this subscription link or by scanning the QR code below.