UNHCR
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GLOBAL INITIATIVE ON PROTECTION AT SEA 2.0

Saving lives, strengthening protection and advancing solutions

Acknowledgements

The Global Initiative on Protection at Sea 2.0 is led by UNHCR in partnership with the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF).

Stakeholders include the Foundation for Humanitarian Action at Sea (FHAS), the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), the International Maritime Rescue Federation (IMRF), the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), and SOS Méditerranée.

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) participates as an observer.

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Building bridges to save lives at sea
FHAS Foundation for Humanitarian Action at Sea

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INTERNATIONAL MARITIME RESCUE FEDERATION

United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime

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COVER PHOTOGRAPH: Indonesia. Rohingya Refugee boat. © UNHCR/Kenzie Eagan

Contents

Building on the Global Initiative 1.0 5

Need for the Global Initiative 2.0 8

Objectives of the Global Initiative 2.0. 10

Priority area 1:
Saving lives and ensuring protection at sea through strengthened search and rescue capacities, effective implementation of international legal obligations and coordinated operational responses 12

Priority area 2:
Informing protection at sea through strengthened gathering, compilation and analysis of maritime movement data. 14

Priority area 3:
Ensuring protection as early as possible through a route-based approach. . . .16

Priority area 4:
Promoting solidarity, cooperation and collective responses to advance protection at sea. 18

Moving forward. 20

Partners and stakeholders 21

Annex I:
Framework for engagement under the Global Initiative on Protection at Sea 2.0. 22

Annex II:
Initial proposed structure of the Operational Plan 25



Indonesia. Rohingya refugees rescued after harrowing sea journey that claimed lives. © UNHCR/Amanda Jufrian



Building on the Global Initiative 1.0

Every year, tens of thousands of people undertake dangerous journeys across the seas in search of safety or in the pursuit of economic or other opportunities. Thousands die or disappear during these journeys. Despite well-established international legal obligations and protection standards, significant gaps remain in ensuring the safety of life at sea; effective search and rescue (SAR); safe disembarkation; access to territory and international protection, as well as protection from violence, exploitation and other serious harm.

The Global Initiative on Protection at Sea 2.0 builds on the Global Initiative launched by UNHCR in 2014 (Global Initiative 1.0),[1] and supported by various stakeholders.[2] The Global Initiative 1.0 was initially developed by UNHCR in the lead up to the 2014 High Commissioner's Dialogue on Protection at Sea[3] to support State-led action to address loss of life at sea and to help ensure protection-sensitive responses to maritime mixed movements of refugees and migrants.

Since the launch of the Global Initiative on Protection at Sea 1.0, there have been notable advancements in its implementation. The Global Initiative also helped elevate international attention to protection challenges at sea, ensuring that refugee, migrant and statelessness protection considerations are better reflected in discussions on maritime governance and policy on search and rescue and disembarkation. The Global Initiative helped spearhead the establishment of inter-agency coordination mechanisms across the humanitarian, maritime and private sector stakeholders. It contributed to strengthening monitoring, data collection and route-based analysis on maritime movements.[4] Further, UNHCR and partners developed and promoted legal guidance and positions on key issues such as the notions of a "distress at sea" situation,[5] rescue at sea,[6] disembarkation,[7] place of safety,[8] as well as on the principle of non-refoulement and access to asylum.[9] The Global Initiative 1.0 has enabled the development of practical operational recommendations,[10] tools and training materials for States and maritime actors.[11]

Despite these advances, the protection situation at sea remains critical, with people exposed to loss of life and a range of serious protection risks before, during and after sea crossings. Deaths and

1 See Global Initiative on Protection at Sea, March 2014.
2 In implementing the Global Initiative on Protection at Sea 1.0, UNHCR collaborated with its formal partners and a broader range of stakeholders who contributed to the implementation of its objectives. These partners included States; private actors, such as shipping companies; civil society organizations; and international agencies, including the International Maritime Organization (IMO), the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime and the United Nations Office of Legal Affairs.
3 See High Commissioner's Dialogue on Protection Challenges, December 2014.
4 See UNHCR Routes Monitor; see also UNHCR-IOM Joint Annual Overview - Migrant and Refugee Movements through the Central Mediterranean Sea in 2025, October 2026.
5 See the joint statement on distress at sea, December 2024.
6 See the guide jointly prepared by IMO, the International Chamber of Shipping (ICS) and UNHCR: Rescue at Sea: A guide to principles and practice in the context of refugees and migrants, May 2026.
7 See "Proposal for a regional cooperative arrangement ensuring predictable disembarkation and subsequent processing of persons rescued-at-sea", June 2018.
8 See the joint inter-agency statement on the concept of place of safety under international law, May 2022.
9 See "Legal considerations on the roles and responsibilities of States in relation to rescue at sea, non-refoulement, and access to asylum", December 2022.
10 See the Secretary-General's recommendations for member States on strengthening cooperation on missing migrants and providing humanitarian assistance to migrants in distress to prevent loss of life in transit: Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration, A/79/590, Annex, November 2024; and United Nations Committee on Enforced Disappearances, General comment no. 1 on enforced disappearance in the context of migration, CED/C/GC/1, October 2023.
11 See the UNHCR–IOM learning programme, "Protection of Migrants and Refugees Moving by Sea", accessed October 2026.

disappearances of adults and children continue to be reported across major maritime routes.

In 2025, 6,501 Rohingya refugees reportedly fled by boat along the South and South-East Asia route, with at least 892 people dying or going missing en route. During the first half of 2026, a further 820 people were recorded dead or missing, representing almost the same number recorded during the whole of 2025 and highlighting the persistence of extreme protection risks along the route.[12] Deaths and disappearances also continue to be recorded across other major maritime routes. In 2025, 1,218 deaths and disappearances were recorded along the West Africa Atlantic route,[13] 922 people died or went missing along the Eastern Route to and from the East and Horn of Africa, including across the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden,[14] and 131 in the Caribbean.[15] On the Central Mediterranean route, 1,330 people were reported dead or missing in 2025.[16] More than 35,000 refugees and migrants have reportedly died or gone missing along Mediterranean routes since 2014.[17]

Children, women and people of diverse gender identities face distinct and heightened protection risks before, during and after sea crossings.[18] Children may be exposed to family separation, exploitation, human trafficking and other forms of harm. Women, girls and people of diverse gender identities may face heightened risks of gender-based violence, sexual exploitation and abuse. Men and boys may be exposed to similar risks, which often go underreported. These risks are often interconnected and may compound one another; for example, family separation may increase exposure to exploitation, violence and abuse. Maritime responses should therefore be age-, gender- and diversity-sensitive and uphold the rights and specific protection needs of people moving by sea. In all actions concerning children, the best interests of the child must be a primary consideration, in line with the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which also upholds the right to life, survival and development.

More widely, people who are moving by sea face a wide range of serious and overlapping risks, including drowning, trafficking, kidnapping for ransom, extortion, deprivation of liberty, and inhuman and degrading treatment. Many are exploited by traffickers, smugglers and other actors, including criminal groups, private individuals and State authorities, and are exposed to violence, sexual abuse and exploitation, forced labour, deprivation of liberty and other grave human rights violations. Journeys often take place on overcrowded, unseaworthy vessels with insufficient food, fuel, water or medical care, leaving passengers vulnerable to dehydration, illness and death. Those intercepted or stranded often experience arbitrary detention, refoulement, family separation or prolonged periods without access to assistance or protection. Along some routes, people encounter barriers to accessing territory and safety, immediate humanitarian and medical care, asylum procedures, protection services, justice and other forms of support. The limited availability of safe and regular pathways, combined with persistent protection gaps in countries of asylum and transit along the routes, leaves many people without effective protection or durable solutions, compelling them to undertake dangerous sea journeys as a last resort.[19] These factors, together with increasingly restrictive and deterrence-based measures, continue to drive people towards more hazardous maritime routes, with grave consequences for their lives and safety.

At the same time, significant evidence gaps limit understanding of maritime movements and of the protection risks people face along different routes. Available data on deaths, disappearances and shipwrecks are minimum estimates, while other protection risks at sea remain underreported and difficult to establish. These gaps are particularly acute along routes where international presence, reporting mechanisms or systematic monitoring remain limited, leaving important data on protection risks and humanitarian needs poorly documented. Strengthening systematic data collection and triangulation across operational, partner and open-source data sets is therefore critical to improving situational awareness, informing evidence-based responses and strengthening accountability.

Beyond the immediate risks faced by individuals, operational experience, protection monitoring and

12 See UNHCR Routes Monitor, accessed October 2026.
13 Ibid.
14 See IOM Missing Migrants Project, accessed October 2026.
15 Ibid.
16 See UNHCR-IOM Joint Annual Overview - Migrant and Refugee Movements through the Central Mediterranean Sea in 2025, October 2026.
17 Ibid.
18 See the joint IOM–UNICEF regional analysis report: Children on the Move in North Africa and along Key Routes, September 2025.
19 See report of the United Nations Secretary-General on oceans and the law of the sea, A/80/364, 4 September 2025.


Italy, Lampedusa, © UNHCR/Michele Cirillo

analysis across maritime routes point to broader systemic challenges. These include gaps in national SAR capacity and in the effectiveness, coordination and predictability of SAR arrangements; difficulties in identifying places of safety for disembarkation; insufficient implementation of applicable legal frameworks; limited national capacity; and, in some cases, lack of political will; limited safe and regular pathways; dangerous smuggling practices; barriers to accessing asylum; restrictive migration policies; and weak coordination among relevant actors. Together, these factors contribute to serious protection gaps along maritime routes, increase exposure to loss of life and other grave protection risks, and demand urgent and coordinated attention.[20]

20 These gaps are also confirmed by the evidence emerging from the Global Maritime SAR System Review, being conducted by the International Maritime Rescue Federation and due to be finalized in 2027.



Italy. UNHCR assists migrants and refugees in Lampedusa. © UNHCR/Alessandro Penso

Need for the Global Initiative 2.0

The international legal framework governing search and rescue at sea provides a strong foundation for action. International law, as reflected in Article 98 of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea,[21] codifies the duty of flag States to assist people in distress at sea, and it requires coastal States to promote adequate and effective SAR services. The 1974 International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea[22] and the 1979 International Convention on Maritime Search and Rescue[23] elaborate these obligations and set out key standards for the conduct of SAR and for coordination responsibilities. In addition, the principle of non-refoulement under international law prohibits the removal in any manner whatsoever of asylum-seekers, refugees or other individuals in need of international protection to territories where they would be at risk of persecution or other serious harm. The non-refoulement obligation is absolute. To comply with it, States must provide access to an effective, individualized procedure to identify refoulement risks before transfer or removal and, where an individual expresses fear, access to an effective remedy with suspensive effect.

Despite these clear legal obligations, significant disparities persist in States' capacities to coordinate and conduct SAR operations, and in the willingness of relevant authorities to fulfil these responsibilities consistently. While some States maintain well-developed SAR systems, others face resource, infrastructure and institutional constraints that limit their capacity to respond effectively. Disembarkation arrangements and the allocation of subsequent responsibilities also remain uneven and, in some contexts, politically contested. Disagreements over disembarkation responsibilities can delay responses and create uncertainty regarding places of safety, contributing to significant protection gaps at sea precisely where humanitarian and protection considerations should prevail.

21 See United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, December 1982.
22 See International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea, November 1974.
23 See International Convention on Maritime Search and Rescue, April 1979.

Protection challenges also often persist after disembarkation. The identification and referral of people in vulnerable situations, and access to adequate reception arrangements, legal assistance and asylum procedures – along with broader protection and assistance services for migrants, refugees and stateless persons – remain uneven and insufficient in many contexts.

These operational challenges are compounded in some contexts by broader policy and protection concerns. Restrictive interpretations of distress at sea, growing externalization and deterrence-oriented policies, restrictions on or criminalization of humanitarian action at sea, and barriers to accessing territory and asylum further constrain protection space and complicate access to safety and international protection.

Taken together, these persistent gaps and challenges demonstrate that existing legal obligations and operational arrangements have not produced predictable protection outcomes across all maritime routes.

At the same time, maritime movements have also become increasingly global and interconnected. While previous efforts have often focused on specific maritime contexts, current operational realities require a more comprehensive, route-based approach[24] that connects countries of origin, asylum, transit, disembarkation and destination, with a view to ensuring continuity of protection along the entire route.

Against this backdrop, the Global Initiative 2.0 seeks to bring renewed attention and collective action to the protection challenges associated with maritime movements by strengthening international cooperation and responsibility-sharing, supporting more effective and predictable SAR and disembarkation arrangements, enhancing route-based protection responses before, during and after maritime journeys, and improving access to protection, safety and solutions for people moving along maritime routes.

Seas as humanitarian spaces

The Global Initiative 2.0 is informed by the notion of "seas as humanitarian spaces", an advocacy and policy framework that featured in discussions at the 2025 United Nations Ocean Conference (UNOC3) and in related initiatives aimed at strengthening humanitarian action at sea. This concept is grounded in the existing international legal framework and emphasizes that rescue operations in maritime areas, where the lives of people on the move are often at risk, must be guided first and foremost by the imperative to save human lives and prevent suffering, in line with humanitarian principles and international law. It highlights that saving lives and ensuring safe disembarkation are not optional, but reflect obligations derived from established legal frameworks and the principle of humanity, emphasizing the importance of ensuring that good-faith humanitarian rescue activities are not unduly restricted or criminalized. Humanitarian action directed towards SAR must therefore remain principled, and be recognized, supported and defended as such. This framework seeks to build global recognition that maritime areas where people are at risk of death, injury or serious harm require coordinated and collective action and protection-sensitive responses. It provides an inclusive basis for cooperation among State and non-State SAR actors, the shipping industry, humanitarian organizations, civil society and refugee- and migrant-led organizations. It also complements and reinforces existing multi-stakeholder initiatives and partnerships dedicated to strengthening humanitarian action at sea and promotes shared responsibility for the protection of life at sea.

24 See UNHCR Route-Based Approach, accessed October 2026.



Italy. UNHCR assists migrants and refugees in Lampedusa. © UNHCR/Alessandro Penso

Objectives of the Global Initiative 2.0

The Global Initiative 2.0 – led by UNHCR, in partnership with the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) – is a continuation of the Global Initiative 1.0 and builds on the foundations established in 2014, while responding to persistent and evolving challenges identified through operational experience, stakeholder consultations and changing maritime realities.

It is founded on the recognition that protection at sea cannot be achieved through SAR and safe disembarkation alone. While rescue at sea is a critical first step in protecting life, effective protection also requires: disembarkation in a place of safety; access to territory; protection-sensitive reception and referral mechanisms; access to justice and, where necessary, to asylum procedures; meaningful alternatives to dangerous sea journeys; and cooperation among States to share responsibilities and identify solutions.

The Global Initiative 2.0 therefore adopts a broader route-based protection framework, recognizing that the drivers, risks and consequences of irregular maritime movements extend beyond the moment of rescue and require coordinated and complementary responses along the entire route.

In this context, the Global Initiative 2.0 seeks to support States and other stakeholders, including entities with maritime expertise and those engaged in protection, humanitarian, advocacy or operational activities related to maritime movements, in their efforts to:

- save lives at sea, ensure safe disembarkation and provide access to territory and protection-sensitive reception and referral mechanisms, including asylum and other forms of protection for people in need;
- promote protection-sensitive, route-based responses to mixed movements at sea, including before the maritime journey and after disembarkation; and
- support States to better address mixed movements by strengthening cooperation that enables the timely identification, screening and referral of people with diverse protection needs, including people in need of international protection and other people in vulnerable situations, while facilitating appropriate protection responses in line with international law.

These objectives are fully aligned with the concept of the route-based approach, which links protection and solutions efforts along the full continuum of mixed-movement responses, including in countries of embarkation and disembarkation. Within this approach, rescue at sea and safe disembarkation are not stand-alone interventions, but key elements of a system that ensures continuous protection and shared responsibility across borders.

The Global Initiative is anchored in UNHCR's international protection and solutions mandate and its supervisory responsibility under the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, alongside the complementary mandates of partner organizations. In addition to building on previous initiatives, it integrates operational support, legal guidance and policy advocacy, addressing the full spectrum of challenges – from immediate rescue to access to safe disembarkation and needs-based responses. The Global Initiative is further informed by the continued applicability of international human rights law in maritime contexts and the protection obligations it entails, including for children. It also recognizes that, in certain maritime settings, international humanitarian law may apply and offer complementary safeguards for civilians and other protected people.

The Global Initiative recognizes that humanitarian action, protection advocacy and engagement with legal and policy frameworks are complementary and mutually reinforcing. Humanitarian actors play a critical role in assisting and protecting people in distress at sea in accordance with the principles of humanity, neutrality and impartiality. Addressing the underlying protection challenges associated with maritime movements also requires engagement with States and other stakeholders to support the implementation of existing international legal obligations, strengthen protection-sensitive responses, ensure access to justice and promote predictable arrangements for rescue, disembarkation and access to protection. The Global Initiative therefore seeks to connect humanitarian action with longer-term protection outcomes while fully respecting the distinct mandates and roles of participating actors.

To support its implementation, the Global Initiative 2.0 will be accompanied by an initial two-year, multi-stakeholder Operational Plan that translates its strategic objectives and priority areas into concrete actions, partnerships, responsibilities and deliverables.

The Global Initiative 2.0 is operationalized through four priority areas:

1 **Saving lives and ensuring protection at sea through strengthened SAR capacities, effective implementation of international legal obligations and coordinated operational responses**

2 **Informing protection at sea through strengthened gathering, compilation and analysis of maritime movement data**

3 **Ensuring protection as early as possible through a route-based approach**

4 **Promoting solidarity, cooperation and collective responses to advance protection at sea**

Priority area 1

Saving lives and ensuring protection at sea through strengthened SAR capacities, effective implementation of international legal obligations and coordinated operational responses



Indonesia. Rohingya refugees rescued after harrowing sea journey that claimed lives. © UNHCR/Amanda Jufrian

Legal and operational frameworks form the foundation for life-saving interventions at sea. States have a legal duty to assist people in distress and to facilitate timely disembarkation in a place of safety, while respecting applicable international protection obligations, including the right to seek asylum and the principle of non-refoulement, among others.

The Global Initiative seeks to support these efforts by promoting the consistent implementation of international legal obligations, strengthening national capacities and fostering coordinated, protection-sensitive responses. It does not create new legal obligations but aims to improve the implementation of existing international frameworks through legal guidance, technical assistance, policy dialogue and operational cooperation.

Predictability of SAR operations and of disembarkation in a place of safety[25] remains one of the most significant operational challenges. In some contexts, humanitarian organizations involved in rescue, assistance or protection activities at sea face criminalization and other legal, administrative or operational restrictions. Such measures can hinder life-saving efforts, limit access to people in need of protection, and affect the predictability and effectiveness of rescue and disembarkation responses.

A key objective of this priority area is therefore to strengthen cooperation among States, maritime authorities and operational partners to ensure timely rescue, predictable disembarkation in a place of safety and needs-based responses, including access to protection. This includes supporting the development of SAR plans, standard operating procedures, referral mechanisms and post-disembarkation arrangements, as well as building the capacities of coast guards and other relevant authorities. The revised IMO–ICS–UNHCR Rescue at Sea guide provides an important operational tool to support these efforts.[26]

Operational engagement may include supporting the development of national SAR plans, post-disembarkation arrangements, standard operating procedures and referral mechanisms that ensure access to asylum procedures, best interests procedures for children, vulnerability screening, and referral pathways for people in vulnerable situations and other persons with specific protection or assistance needs at points of

25 A place of safety should be understood in line with applicable international law and protection standards, including the principle of non-refoulement. See the joint inter-agency statement on the concept of place of safety, May 2022.

26 See the IMO–ICS–UNHCR Rescue at Sea guide, May 2026.

disembarkation. It may also include training coast guard personnel and other relevant institutions, including through simulation exercises coordinated with the relevant authorities.

The Global Initiative also promotes coordinated engagement among UNHCR, IOM, OHCHR, UNICEF and other relevant United Nations agencies, civil society organizations and other partners in support of this objective, in accordance with their respective mandates.

Operational engagement may extend to providing humanitarian assistance at disembarkation, such as information, protection monitoring and referral services to identify people requiring international protection or other forms of assistance. In addition, systematic collection and analysis of operational SAR data – including response times, coordination handovers and disembarkation outcomes – will support evidence-based planning, capacity development and accountability.

Strengthening communication and alert mechanisms so that authorities are informed of situations of distress, where needed, remains an important element of protection-at-sea responses. The Global Initiative also promotes evidence-based monitoring, documentation and dialogue to strengthen accountability for failures to rescue people in distress or to ensure disembarkation in places of safety. Regional dialogue and existing cooperation frameworks – including the Chile Declaration and Plan of Action 2024–2034, the Bali Process, the Rabat Process and the Khartoum Process – provide valuable platforms for exchanging good practices and promoting more predictable, coordinated approaches to rescue and disembarkation across maritime routes.

To achieve the objectives of this priority area, the following activities will be implemented, among others:

i. **promote legal clarity and procedural predictability** by supporting States in developing standard operating procedures and administrative guidance to ensure that humanitarian rescue activities and their coordination with Maritime Rescue Coordination Centres (MRCCs) are conducted in accordance with applicable legal frameworks;

ii. **engage with States and other stakeholders on issues of timely and predictable access to places of disembarkation, reception facilities and protection services**, including asylum procedures, referral mechanisms and child protection systems;

iii. **strengthen SAR, reception and post-disembarkation** capacities through technical assistance, training, simulation exercises, peer exchanges and other capacity-building initiatives;

iv. **strengthen coordination and cooperation among States, maritime authorities, United Nations agencies, non-governmental organizations, refugee- and migrant-led organizations, other community-based organizations and other actors** involved in rescue, disembarkation and post-disembarkation responses through coordination and information-sharing mechanisms and operational arrangements that clearly define roles, responsibilities and referral pathways;

v. **monitor and address legal, administrative and operational factors that affect rescue, disembarkation and access to protection**, while advocating for and promoting an enabling environment for good-faith humanitarian action at sea, legal certainty for actors involved in life-saving activities and appropriate distinctions between humanitarian assistance and criminal conduct; and

vi. **ensure age-, gender- and diversity-sensitive rescue, disembarkation and post-disembarkation responses**, including child protection safeguards, best interests procedures, disability inclusion measures and appropriate referral pathways for people with specific protection needs.

Priority area 2

Informing protection at sea through strengthened gathering, compilation and analysis of maritime movement data

Timely, high-quality data are essential to identify protection risks and emerging trends, inform operational responses, and enable evidence-based policy and advocacy. Significant data gaps and inconsistencies persist across many maritime routes, with uneven coverage and quality and with information often fragmented across different sources, systems and actors. Capacity for data collection, compilation and analysis remains uneven, particularly in contexts where monitoring mechanisms, operational presence or reporting capacities are limited and where secondary sources may not be readily available or of sufficient quality. As a result, protection incidents, deaths, disappearances, gender-based violence, human trafficking and other human rights violations may be underreported, which affects situational awareness and the capacity for evidence-informed responses. In order to generate a more comprehensive understanding of protection risks and trends, it is therefore essential to improve data availability and coverage and to strengthen analytical capacity.

This priority area aims to strengthen the availability, quality, responsible sharing, disaggregation and interoperability of data on maritime movements and on protection incidents and risks associated with the maritime segment, and of criminal justice data on crimes committed in this context. Maritime crossings form only one segment of broader mixed-movement routes, so analysis should seek to connect maritime movement data with relevant information from countries of origin, transit, disembarkation and destination in order to support a route-based understanding of movement dynamics, protection risks and onward mobility patterns.

Improved data collection, analysis and information-sharing enable evidence-based protection, SAR and route-based responses and also serve as a cross-cutting enabler for the implementation of the other priority areas.

Key data elements:

- Data on **movements**: departures, interceptions, rescues, arrivals and disembarkations, including relevant information on the profiles of people moving and appropriate disaggregation by age, gender, disability and other relevant characteristics
- Data on **deaths** and disappearances: incidents, including distress indicators where relevant
- Data on **smuggling**: routes, modalities, practices and associated protection risks, where available, including criminal justice data
- Data on **operational SAR**: response and non-response to distress, including response times, coordination gaps, dangerous practices at sea and delayed or denied disembarkation



Spain. Shipwrecked boats used by migrants and refugees piled up in the port of Barbate. Spain. © UNHCR/Markel Redondo

- Data on **policy and practice**: changes in SAR arrangements and disembarkation practices, including disembarkation in places that are not safe, and in legal or administrative measures affecting rescue, access to territory and protection

To strengthen the availability, analysis and use of these data, the Global Initiative 2.0 will build on existing information products (e.g. the UNHCR Routes Monitor dashboard and the IOM Displacement Tracking Matrix) and inter-agency data tools (e.g. the UNHCR–IOM Joint Annual Overview on movements through the Central Mediterranean Sea). The work will also include promoting and strengthening data interoperability and information-sharing arrangements among United Nations agencies, States and operational partners, while upholding the right to privacy. Improved data interoperability can support more consistent route-based analysis, trend monitoring, early warning (e.g. early identification of distress incidents so the authorities can be alerted) and evidence-based operational and policy responses across regions, while enabling responsible information exchange in line with applicable data protection and data responsibility principles.

The Global Initiative 2.0 will also explore innovative partnerships with academic institutions, research organizations and private-sector actors to strengthen data collection, analysis, predictive capacities and visualization tools in support of protection-sensitive responses. Such data collection, processing and information-sharing should be undertaken for clearly defined protection and humanitarian purposes and in accordance with applicable data protection and data responsibility standards.

To achieve the objectives of this priority area, the following activities will be implemented, among others:

i. **strengthen data collection and coverage across maritime routes**, including through common indicators on movements, protection risks, smuggling dynamics, SAR and disembarkation, and criminal justice data, with appropriate data disaggregation;

ii. **enhance interoperability** through the use of common analytical frameworks, indicators and data standards across different segments of mixed-movement routes, including maritime and overland movements, to promote greater consistency and comparability of data and to enable responsible information-sharing that upholds the right to privacy and data protection standards;

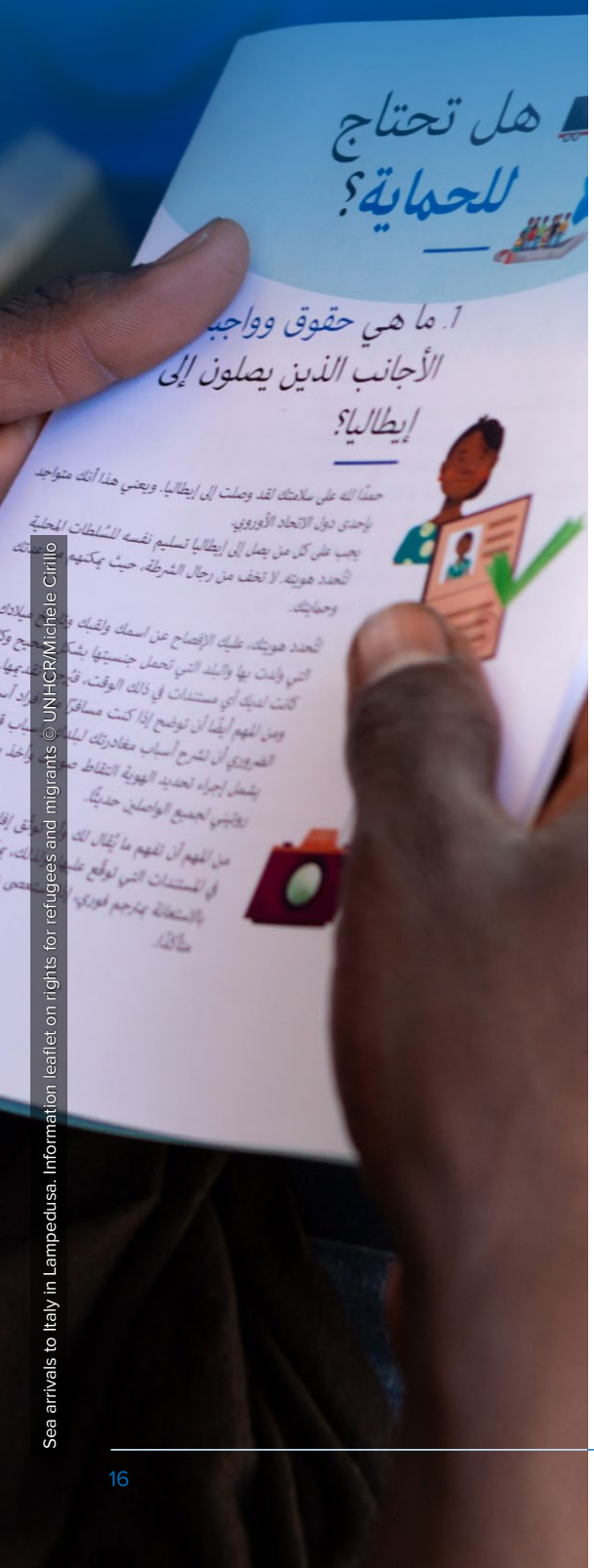
iii. **strengthen coordination and information-sharing among stakeholders**, including States, United Nations agencies, academia, research institutions, operational partners and, where appropriate, private-sector actors, building on existing products, platforms and tools;

iv. **improve route-based analysis and trend monitoring**, to generate actionable evidence to inform protection, SAR, preparedness, anti-trafficking, counter-smuggling, policy and advocacy responses; and

v. **promote innovative approaches** to route monitoring, horizon scanning, early warning and predictive analysis, including through pilot initiatives and targeted collaboration with technical experts and research partners.

Priority area 3

Ensuring protection as early as possible through a route-based approach



Sea arrivals to Italy in Lampedusa. Information leaflet on rights for refugees and migrants © UNHCR/Michele Cirillo

Protection needs do not begin when people board a boat or end once they disembark. Effective route-based approaches seek to ensure protection as early as possible before departure, throughout the journey, upon disembarkation, during onward movement and at destination by linking protection, assistance and solutions across the entire route.

Providing continuous protection throughout the route helps reduce reliance on dangerous sea journeys and ensures that people who are compelled to undertake them can access protection and solutions at every stage of their journey. The Global Initiative 2.0 therefore promotes route-based protection responses that strengthen protection systems before departure, ensure timely access to protection following disembarkation, and facilitate access to rights, services and durable solutions throughout the route. This includes strengthening the presence of protection actors as early as possible; expanding access to international protection, information and essential services (including education, family tracing and family reunification); promoting access to legal identity and documentation; and supporting socioeconomic inclusion where appropriate. After disembarkation, route-based responses should facilitate access to asylum procedures, referral mechanisms and other protection services, ensuring that people in vulnerable situations and others with specific protection needs receive appropriate support while reducing the need for dangerous onward movements.

Greater investment in safe and regular pathways for admission to, and stay in, a country is essential to reducing dangerous maritime movements. This includes expanding access for work, study, family reunification and other reasons. Regular admission pathways are essential for protecting the lives of refugees and migrants in mixed movements. By offering safe and regulated alternatives, they reduce reliance on irregular and dangerous journeys, limit exposure to trafficking and exploitation, and ensure access to protection, assistance and durable solutions without resorting to life-threatening routes.[27]

Effective communication and engagement with people on the move and their communities are integral to route-based protection responses. People on the move should have access to timely, accurate and accessible information on the risks associated with dangerous sea crossings, their rights, available protection services and safe alternatives, delivered in languages

27 Certain programmes are specifically designed for refugees, such as resettlement and complementary pathways. For instance, in 2025, fewer than 3,000 refugees in particularly vulnerable situations were resettled from North Africa, with fewer than half of them resettled to Europe, falling well short of existing protection needs.

and formats that take account of their age, vulnerabilities and specific needs. This should include information on available protection and assistance services, lawful opportunities and pathways, including for education, employment, family reunification and third-country solutions, and on the methods used by smuggling and trafficking networks to recruit and exploit people on the move, including through online channels. Information on available reporting and referral mechanisms should also be provided where relevant. Such efforts can help reduce exposure to protection risks, strengthen informed decision-making and reduce reliance on dangerous journeys. The Global Initiative 2.0 also encourages partnerships to address misinformation and disinformation relating to maritime movements and available protection pathways, including engagement with social media platforms to better identify and address online information risks. Outreach activities may be delivered through a range of modalities depending on the context, including community-based approaches, peer-to-peer engagement, digital tools and social media, information hubs along routes and engagement with affected communities.[28] These activities should build trust, connect people to available assistance and protection services, preserve family unity (including by preventing family separation), support the restoration of family links and facilitate family reunification without delay.

In parallel, reinforcing route-based approaches also requires sustained advocacy and cooperation to promote protection-sensitive asylum and migration policies both along routes and in countries of destination. As increasingly restrictive policy environments can drive people to resort to more dangerous onward movements, the Global Initiative 2.0 aims to support efforts to strengthen access to territory and safety, fair and efficient asylum procedures, legal documentation and rights-based responses that reduce protection risks, while respecting States' international obligations. Strengthening asylum systems, access to legal identity and documentation (including the ability to obtain, replace or verify identity documents and maintain continuity of identity across borders) and socioeconomic inclusion along the route can further reduce protection risks and improve access to protection and solutions.

To achieve the objectives of this priority area, the following activities will be implemented, among others:

i. **strengthen protection systems** at key points along maritime routes, including identification and referral mechanisms and access to territory, asylum, legal identity, and other documentation and essential services before departure, during movement and following disembarkation;

ii. **expand access to third-country solutions, resettlement and other legal admission pathways**, including family reunification and complementary pathways, particularly where limited opportunities contribute to dangerous onward movements;

iii. **develop targeted communication and community-based protection initiatives**, including through information hubs, digital tools, community networks and peer-to-peer approaches, providing accessible information on rights, protection services, available pathways and risks associated with dangerous journeys, smuggling and trafficking;

iv. **build partnerships to address online risks including recruitment, exploitation and disinformation** through strategic engagement with technology partners (such as social media platforms), digital rights groups, regulators and law enforcement; and

v. **strengthen cross-border and route-based protection coordination**, including cooperation and information exchange among States, United Nations agencies and partners to improve continuity of protection, referrals and follow-up across countries of origin, asylum, transit, disembarkation and destination.

28 For example, in Bangladesh, UNHCR has supported community-based awareness-raising activities in Rohingya refugee camps, including film screenings designed to inform refugees about the risks associated with irregular maritime movements.

Priority area 4

Promoting solidarity, cooperation and collective responses to advance protection at sea



Sea arrivals to Italy in Lampedusa. © UNHCR/Michele Cirillo

Addressing situations of distress at sea requires approaches grounded in international cooperation, solidarity and shared responsibility. Strengthened cooperation among States and other relevant actors, supported by reliable data, practical coordination mechanisms and capacity-sharing arrangements, is essential for delivering timely and rights-based responses and alleviating disproportionate pressures on individual States.

Cooperative responses should be guided by the principles of responsibility-sharing and international solidarity. They should seek to ensure that arrangements for disembarkation, reception, processing and solutions enhance protection and access to rights, while avoiding practices that may result in the externalization of responsibilities or diminished protection standards for refugees and migrants. Equitable and predictable responses to situations of distress at sea should extend beyond rescue operations to encompass reception arrangements, access to protection and pathways towards solutions following disembarkation. Strengthening regional data-sharing arrangements can support evidence-based discussions among States and other stakeholders and facilitate more predictable and coordinated responses.

Advancing such responses requires sustained cooperation among States and other relevant actors, including through regional and route-based arrangements adapted to different operational contexts, and building on regional precedents, such as the Djibouti Model Regional Framework,[29] that can be adapted to different contexts. Such arrangements may take different forms, including voluntary cooperation frameworks, bilateral or regional agreements, practical coordination mechanisms, capacity-sharing initiatives and other solidarity-based approaches.

To achieve the objectives of this priority area, the following activities will be implemented, among others:

i. **promote predictable and transparent arrangements among States following rescue at sea, anchored in solidarity**, including cooperation on disembarkation, reception, processing, vulnerability screening, protection and access to solutions, while safeguarding against the shifting of responsibility that may reduce protection standards;

ii. **strengthen capacity-sharing and operational support for States facing disproportionate pressures**, particularly States of disembarkation, including through technical assistance, exchange of expertise and, where appropriate, rapid

29 See UNHCR Summary Conclusions: Refugees and Asylum-Seekers in Distress at Sea, compiled after the expert meeting held in Djibouti (8–11 November), December 2011.

deployment of multidisciplinary experts or mobile protection teams;

iii. **strengthen transnational cooperation on missing persons and support for families**, including through national focal points or other appropriate coordination mechanisms for search and identification, information exchange and engagement with families searching for missing relatives, as well as efforts to support the identification of deceased and missing persons and, where relevant, to link such efforts with civil registration and other legal identity systems;[30] and

iv. **facilitate regional and route-based cooperation and solidarity arrangements**, including through regional dialogue, voluntary cooperation frameworks, practical coordination arrangements and exchange of good practices.

30 See the Secretary-General's recommendations on saving migrants' lives, 2024.



Indonesia. Rohingya children coloring a "Hope" banner, © UNHCR/Amanda Jufrian



Italy. UNHCR assists migrants and refugees in Lampedusa. © UNHCR/Alessandro Penso

Moving forward

The Global Initiative on Protection at Sea 2.0 provides a renewed framework for collective action to address the protection challenges associated with maritime movements. Building on existing international legal obligations and operational experience, it seeks to translate commitments into more predictable, coordinated and protection-sensitive responses across maritime routes.

Its success will depend on sustained engagement by States and on the collective contribution of United Nations agencies, international and regional organizations, civil society, refugee- and migrant-led and other community-based organizations, maritime and private-sector actors, and other stakeholders. Through its four priority areas and accompanying Operational Plan, the Global Initiative will provide a platform for developing practical responses adapted to different regional and operational contexts, while strengthening cooperation and accountability.

The Global Initiative 2.0 is guided by an overarching goal: to save lives, enhance access to protection and solutions, and ensure that people compelled to move by sea are protected, assisted and treated with dignity throughout their journeys.



Indonesia. Rohingya refugees rescued after harrowing sea journey that claimed lives. © UNHCR/Amanda Jufrian

Partners and stakeholders

The Global Initiative on Protection at Sea 2.0 is led by UNHCR in partnership with the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF).

Stakeholders include the Foundation for Humanitarian Action at Sea (FHAS), the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), the International Maritime Rescue Federation (IMRF), the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), and SOS Méditerranée. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) participates as an observer.

Partners formally support and endorse the Global Initiative on Protection at Sea 2.0 and actively contribute to the implementation of its objectives and activities. Stakeholders and observers, while not formally endorsing the Global Initiative, contribute to the achievement of its objectives and support the implementation of the Operational Plan through their expertise, activities and engagement in line with their mandates, interests and capacity.

UNHCR and partners will engage with stakeholders and observers throughout the implementation of the Global Initiative, including in taking forward the Operational Plan, in accordance with the Framework for engagement under the Global Initiative on Protection at Sea 2.0 set out in Annex I.



Puerto Rico. Maritime journeys of asylum seekers and migrants. © UNHCR/Kevin Keen

Annexes

Annex I: Framework for engagement under the Global Initiative on Protection at Sea 2.0

The Global Initiative on Protection at Sea 2.0 is a multi-stakeholder initiative led by UNHCR in partnership with IOM, OHCHR and UNICEF that brings together States, public and private maritime entities, and interested United Nations and other international organizations to advance protection-sensitive responses to people moving by sea.

To support implementation of the Global Initiative's objectives, partners and other interested stakeholders will jointly develop and periodically review an Operational Plan. The Operational Plan will identify priority areas, activities, responsibilities and coordination arrangements, while remaining sufficiently flexible to adapt to evolving operational contexts and emerging challenges.

Participation in the Global Initiative 2.0 depends on the interests, capacities and mandates of the respective partners and other stakeholders. Recognizing the diversity of mandates, expertise, operational presence, strategic priorities and resource capacities, partners and other stakeholders may choose to engage in one or more of the following areas of collaboration according to their interests, comparative advantages and available capacity. The nature and scope of each entity's contribution may evolve over time and be adapted to emerging priorities, opportunities and operational needs. Each stakeholder may also volunteer to lead specific workstreams within the Operational Plan.

1. Development and implementation of the Operational Plan

The Global Initiative's partners and other interested stakeholders may contribute to the design, implementation and review of the Operational Plan in accordance with their expertise and capacities.

Activities may include:

- jointly developing and periodically updating the Operational Plan;
- leading or co-leading priority areas, thematic initiatives or activities identified in the Operational Plan;
- supporting implementation of regional, route-based, national or thematic action plans;
- contributing to pilot initiatives, simulations and field-level implementation; and
- monitoring progress and identifying emerging priorities requiring adjustments to activities.

2. Joint advocacy and policy engagement

Partners and other interested stakeholders may collaborate to promote protection-sensitive responses to maritime movements and strengthen implementation of applicable international legal frameworks.

Activities may include:

- holding joint global, regional or national launches of the Global Initiative 2.0 and technical consultations on protection at sea;
- developing joint advocacy messages, policy papers and legal guidance;
- undertaking coordinated advocacy in international and regional forums, including maritime, migration, refugee and human rights processes; and
- promoting agreed strategic messages and policy concepts developed under the Global Initiative.

3. Communications and visibility

Partners and other interested stakeholders may work together to increase visibility of protection challenges at sea and promote good practices.

Activities may include:

- running joint communication campaigns;
- producing shared publications, reports and knowledge products;
- engaging with the media in a coordinated way where appropriate; and
- promoting key messages, events and achievements of the Global Initiative publicly.

4. Resource mobilization and joint fundraising

Recognizing the scale of protection challenges at sea, partners and other interested stakeholders may cooperate to mobilize financial and technical resources for implementation of the Global Initiative.

Activities may include:

- undertaking joint fundraising initiatives;
- developing multi-partner funding proposals;
- engaging with institutional donors, foundations and the private sector;
- mobilizing resources for regional or thematic workstreams; and
- identifying opportunities for pooled funding and collaborative programming.

5. Data, research and evidence generation

Partners and other interested stakeholders may strengthen the evidence base underpinning protection at sea through coordinated data collection and analysis.

Activities may include:

- sharing operational data where appropriate and in line with applicable data protection standards;
- conducting joint research and route-based analysis;
- developing common indicators and monitoring frameworks;
- producing annual trend reports and thematic studies; and
- identifying emerging protection risks and operational gaps.

6. Capacity development and knowledge-sharing

Partners and other interested stakeholders may jointly strengthen the capacities of States and operational actors.

Activities may include:

- holding joint webinars, conferences and learning events;
- training coast guards, Maritime Rescue Coordination Centres (MRCCs), border authorities and reception actors;
- supporting peer-to-peer exchanges among States;
- developing e-learning courses and training curricula;
- organizing simulation exercises and regional workshops;
- developing multimedia products, digital platforms and awareness campaigns; and
- exchanging lessons learned, research and promising practices.

7. Coordination and governance

Partners and other interested stakeholders may contribute to the governance and strategic direction of the Global Initiative through established coordination mechanisms, such as the Inter-Agency Group on Protection of the Refugees and Migrants Moving by Sea and other relevant forums and groups.

Activities may include:

- co-chairing the Inter-Agency Group on Protection of Refugees and Migrants Moving by Sea;
- holding joint annual planning and review meetings;
- monitoring implementation of the Operational Plan;
- producing implementation reports; and
- identifying emerging priorities and adapting activities.

Annex II:
Initial proposed structure of the Operational Plan

Priority area	Workstream	Area of collective action	Proposed lead	Proposed Co-lead(s)	Key stakeholders	Indicative output/ deliverable

UNHCR
The UN Refugee Agency

GLOBAL INITIATIVE ON PROTECTION AT SEA 2.0

Saving lives, strengthening protection and advancing solutions

November 2026

PARTNERS

IOM UN MIGRATION

UNITED NATIONS HUMAN RIGHTS OFFICE OF THE HIGH COMMISSIONER

unicef

STAKEHOLDERS

Building bridges to save lives at sea
FHAS Foundation for Humanitarian Action at Sea

IFRC

INTERNATIONAL MARITIME RESCUE FEDERATION

United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime

SOS MEDITERRANEE