ROUTE-BASED APPROACH
From Vision to Implementation

UNHCR Brief
August 2026

Introduction

The route-based approach (RteBA) reflects UNHCR's recognition that strengthening protection and solutions response for those with international protection needs in the context of mixed and onward movements requires looking beyond individual countries and supporting more coordinated responses along routes. While protection interventions have traditionally been planned and delivered within national contexts, many of the protection risks faced by refugees and asylum-seekers, and the responses needed to address them, extend across borders and involve multiple actors.

Developed jointly by UNHCR and IOM, within their respective mandates, together with a range of actors the route-based approach provides a strategic framework for supporting States in strengthening protection-sensitive asylum and migration systems while fostering greater continuity of protection across countries of origin, asylum, transit and destination. Rather than creating parallel mechanisms, the approach builds on existing systems and promotes complementary action among governments, humanitarian and development actors, civil society and affected communities.

Building on the six pillars of the route-based approach, UNHCR has increasingly focused on translating the framework into practical tools, operational guidance and partnerships that help States and relevant stakeholders respond more effectively to the protection challenges associated with mixed movements.

Since the publication of the first route-based approach briefing note in 2025[1], UNHCR has increasingly focused on translating the framework into operational practice, developing tools, operational guidance and partnerships across its six pillars. This brief provides an overview of progress to date and introduces a series of thematic briefs highlighting key areas of implementation in greater depth.

1. The route-based approach at a glance

The route-based approach promotes earlier, more coordinated and more connected responses across countries sharing the same routes. It provides a common framework linking protection, asylum, migration management and solutions across countries of origin, asylum, transit and destination, enabling States and partners to address protection risks before they escalate and to strengthen continuity of protection throughout people's journeys.

The approach is guided by three mutually reinforcing objectives: saving lives and reducing harm along routes; creating viable alternatives to dangerous journeys through expanded access to protection, inclusion and safe pathways; and supporting States in developing asylum and migration systems that manage mixed movements in a lawful, humane and sustainable manner.

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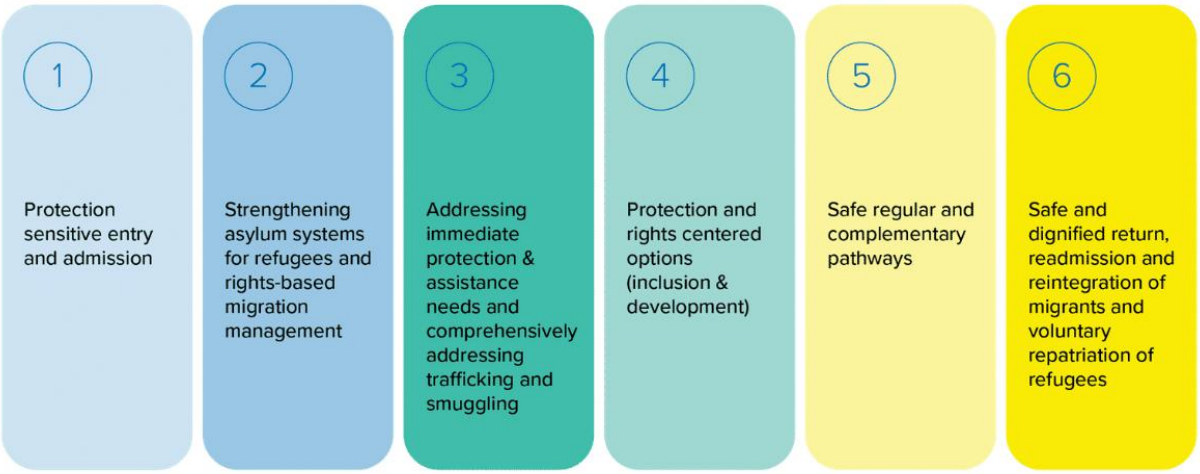
[1] UNHCR, Briefing Note Route-Based Approach: From Strategy to Action (September 2025), available at: https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/120096

Achieving these objectives requires a shift in the way mixed and onwards movements are understood and addressed. The route-based approach encourages responses that move beyond isolated country interventions towards engagement informed by shared evidence and route-level analysis; stronger national systems and protection opportunities earlier along routes; and collaboration among governments, humanitarian, development and peace actors, civil society, community-based organizations, organizations led by forcibly displaced and stateless people and affected communities through a whole-of-society approach.

These principles are translated into practice through six mutually reinforcing pillars, which together provide the operational architecture of the route-based approach.



2. From Strategy to Operational Practice

Over the past year, UNHCR has worked to embed route-based thinking more systematically into operational responses, connecting interventions across borders and promoting greater coherence between protection, asylum, migration management and solutions. The workstreams below illustrate how this is taking shape in practice.

a. Strengthening protection along routes

The route-based approach is shaping how UNHCR approaches protection in mixed movement contexts, with greater emphasis on identifying protection risks earlier, supporting access to protection and assistance throughout journeys, and ensuring that responses remain connected across borders. Its responses are informed by age, gender and diversity considerations and developed with affected communities to ensure that protection interventions remain accessible, relevant and responsive to different needs and capacities.

This includes a more integrated responses to the risks faced by children, victims of trafficking, those travelling by sea and other individuals with specific protection needs. At the same time, greater attention has been given to ensuring that refugees and asylum seekers in mixed and onward movement contexts have access to timely, reliable and actionable information and are better connected to available services and referral mechanisms along routes. Community and diaspora networks, community-based organizations, and organizations led by forcibly displaced and stateless persons also play an important role in strengthening protection and access to services along routes.

Multi-Purpose Hubs provide practical entry points for protection, information, services and referrals at strategic locations along routes, with 17 physical and hybrid hubs currently operational.[2]

b. Building the evidence base

Effective protection response along routes depends on a shared up to date understanding of movement dynamics, including who is on the move, their intentions and the risks they encounter, as well as responses available along routes. UNHCR has therefore continued investing in stronger route-level evidence through enhanced analysis, protection monitoring, service mapping and collaboration with partners.

Particular efforts have focused on expanding the Routes Monitor,[3] UNHCR's global platform for consolidating and analyzing mixed movement data and developments across key maritime and land routes, improving the comparability and accessibility of route-level evidence, and strengthening the integration of quantitative, qualitative and operational information.

As mixed movements increasingly span multiple countries and regions, UNHCR is also strengthening interoperability and analytical harmonization across data systems and with other actors. This includes ongoing collaboration with IOM through the joint initiative From Routes to Evidence-Based Response, which seeks to improve data interoperability, align analytical approaches and support joint analytical products, as well as partnerships with actors such as the Mixed Migration Centre (MMC) to deepen understanding of movement dynamics.[4]

At the same time, UNHCR is advancing work on anticipatory analysis, including horizon scanning and foresight, is helping identify emerging trends and risks and inform preparedness and operational planning. Community perspectives and participatory approaches are also increasingly integrated into route-level analysis, helping ensure that evidence reflects lived experiences, emerging risks and barriers to accessing protection and services.

Together, these efforts strengthen the evidence base for operational planning and preparedness, advocacy with States and other stakeholders, the design of protection and assistance responses, and more coordinated action across countries and along routes.

c. Strengthening partnerships and coordination

No single actor can effectively address the complexity of mixed movements. The route-based approach therefore places collaboration and partnerships at the center of its operationalization, recognizing that stronger protection outcomes depend on coordinated action by governments, humanitarian and development actors, civil society, community-based organizations, organizations led by forcibly and stateless persons, academia and affected communities. Beyond expanding collaboration, increasing emphasis has been placed on strengthening route-level coordination and fostering dialogue across countries sharing the same routes, helping move from parallel interventions towards more complementary and coherent responses. This is being advanced through mechanisms such as the

[2] UNHCR Mapping of Multi-Purpose Hubs, June 2026, available at: https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/121617

[3] UNHCR Routes Monitor, available at: https://data.unhcr.org/en/working-group/496

[4] See for instance, Decision-making, experiences, and aspirations of refugees and migrants along the Eastern Route through Djibouti, MMC and UNHCR - July 2026, available at: https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/123322

global platform convened by UNHCR, IOM and ICVA which brings together NGOs, refugee-led organizations, UN agencies and other partners, alongside route-level platforms and dialogues bringing together States and civil society actors to identify shared and country-specific priorities.

d. Communities as partners in protection

Communities are not only recipients of protection and assistance; they are essential partners in strengthening protection along routes. Refugees, asylum-seekers and migrants bring first-hand critical knowledge of movement dynamics, protection risks, available services and emerging needs. Building on this understanding, UNHCR has increasingly integrated community engagement into route-based programming, strengthening collaboration with community-based organizations, organizations led by forcibly and stateless persons and diaspora networks, promoting community-based protection and expanding approaches to communication with communities.

The Global Reference Group of community-based organizations and organizations led by forcibly displaced and stateless on the Route-Based Approach provides a structured channel for these perspectives to inform the route-based approach, complemented by small grants supporting community-led responses to mixed movements. These refugee-, women-, youth-, LGBTIQ+-led organizations contribute to the mapping of protection and assistance services, helping identify available support and gaps along routes, identify protection risks, mobilize existing local capacities, strengthen community-led support mechanisms and contribute directly to protection and solutions along routes.

e. Strengthening learning and operational capacity

Embedding the route-based approach into operational practice also requires those responding to mixed movements to have the knowledge and the practical skills to apply it across different contexts. UNHCR has therefore continued investing in practical learning opportunities, operational guidance and peer-learning initiatives.

A dedicated route-based approach learning programme is being developed for UNHCR staff, while collaboration with the Sanremo Institute is strengthening learning on mixed movements and protection for authorities and other frontline actors. Learning initiatives incorporate community-based protection, meaningful participation and accountability to affected people as core elements of the responses for staff and partners working in mixed movement contexts. These efforts aim to strengthen institutional capacity while fostering greater consistency in protection-sensitive responses across routes.

3. Looking Ahead

As mixed movements continue to evolve, UNHCR will continue adapting its response and strengthening cooperation across routes.

Building on the progress made to date, UNHCR is launching a series of thematic briefs that explore key areas of the route-based approach in greater depth. Together, these publications illustrate how the framework is being translated into practical action across different operational contexts while contributing to stronger protection outcomes for refugees and asylum-seekers along routes.

The series will initially cover:

- **Partnerships and Coordination** – promoting route-level cooperation among States, UN agencies, civil society and other partners.
- **Community Engagement in Mixed Movements** – strengthening community participation and engagement of community-based organizations, diaspora networks and organizations led by forcibly displaced and stateless along routes.
- **Communication with Communities: Telling the Real Story (TRS)** – improving access to timely, reliable and actionable information throughout the journey, with forcibly displaced communities helping to shape and deliver information to their communities.
- **Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS)** – strengthening access to appropriate MHPSS and continuity of support for refugees and asylum-seekers in mixed and onward movements.
- **Child Protection** – prevention and response to specific protection risks faced by children in mixed movements.
- **Data and Evidence** – strengthening route-level analysis, protection monitoring and service mapping.
- **Protection at Sea** – strengthening protection-sensitive responses to movements by sea.
- **Trafficking and Smuggling** – enhancing protection responses to trafficking in persons and risks associated with smuggling.
- **Multi-Purpose Hubs** – supporting integrated service delivery and referrals along routes.

Further information

UNHCR's Route-Based Approach Website
Publications, tools and resources on the route-based approach

Stay updated: Subscribe to the route-based approach newsletter